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A Guarded Courtship: Soviet Cultural Diplomacy in Iran from the Late 1940s to the 1960s

By bringing to bear previously unstudied Soviet archival documents and conducting firsthand interviews with former diplomats, the article traces the ways in which the Soviet Union sought out opportunities to reinvigorate deteriorated Soviet-Iranian ties through cultural organizations and events in Iran during the decades following World War II. A variety of Soviet cultural representatives—from wrestlers to classical musicians to scholars of Iranian literature—were marshaled for this effort, which bore unexpected fruit considering the modest expectations of the Soviet leadership, ideological differences between the two countries, and increasingly dominant US cultural projection. The connections between cultural ties and state goals, Iranian perceptions of Russia, and the Soviet/Russian sympathies of some members of the shah's government are among sub-themes examined.

The Soviet Union, having been a major foreign player with tremendous influence in Iran in the first half of the twentieth century, and having enjoyed a huge boost in prestige after the victory at Stalingrad in 1943, found itself after World War II largely reduced to a sideline observer, searching out opportunities to reinvigorate Soviet-Iranian ties. Not only had relations between the USSR and Iran deteriorated due to wartime and post-war missteps, such as the delayed withdrawal of Soviet forces and machinations in Iranian Azerbaijan in 1946—which resulted in the sacking of *Tudeh* headquarters by a mob—but Iran was now being pulled deeper into US strategy in the Middle East, which under the Truman Doctrine was primarily oriented around preventing the spread of communism in Iran.¹ In 1949, the *Tudeh* party was outlawed, and the Iranian government was maintaining tight restrictions on Soviet cultural programs and events. While conditions were not so harsh as at the nadir of Iran-Soviet relations under Reza Shah, when Soviet literature

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The authors would like to express special thanks to Kevin McNeer for his critical comments and translation.

This article was originally published with errors. This version has been corrected. Please see Corrigendum (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00210862.2018.1480335>).

was banned and its importation subject to punishment, and “russophilia” could result in imprisonment; after World War II, The Iranian Organization for National Intelligence and Security (SAVAK) monitored and often harassed anyone involved in Soviet organizations.² Moreover, there was increasingly vigorous competition for Iranian “hearts and minds.” The 1941 Allied occupation of Iran and the exodus of Reza Shah and his strict censorship had set off a flurry of foreign media activity aimed at projecting political and cultural influence. Eighteen periodicals were being published by foreign powers in Iran over the course of much of the 1940s: in Polish, French, English and Russian, as well as Turkish, Kurdish and Armenian.³ The Iran-America Society and Anglo-Persian Institute were operating in a number of Iranian cities, publishing periodicals, screening films, offering language classes and generally promoting their respective national identities and agendas. The import of foreign cinema to woo Iranian viewers mushroomed, and Hollywood movies, with their mass, trans-class appeal, were an ace in the hand of US soft-power strategists. This was the playing field the Soviets were faced with in a key country with a shared border.

Soviet cultural projection in Iran is often broadly described in terms of aggressive opportunism and appropriation and manipulation of the Persianate heritage, framed as a stronger alien power attempting to enforce cultural codes on a weaker one. Cold War observers such as Sovietologist Frederick Barghoorn wrote generally of “Moscow-staged spectacles” and the “unleashing” of a “Soviet Cultural offensive.”⁴ US State Department officials met behind closed doors to discuss ways to counter the Soviet “propaganda offensive” in Iran.⁵ But post-war Soviet cultural commissars felt themselves working at a decided disadvantage in Iran, looking for a niche and trying to please even decades after the debacle in Iranian Azerbaijan. Relations with the shah never grew to be particularly warm. The upper echelons of Soviet power, having seen aggressive interventionist efforts decisively blunted in the first half of the twentieth century, had settled on more modest goals, to the point where cultural representatives in Iran not infrequently complained of a lack of responsiveness from Moscow. The matured Soviet policy was to tread carefully in Iran; the tradition of brazen interventionism from earlier decades would be carried forward by the Americans and the British.

The present article examines the ways in which Soviet bureaucrats and sympathetic Iranians circumvented these obstacles: forging alliances with influential government figures who provided a partial shield against SAVAK activity, refraining from overambitious propaganda and relying on “high culture,” such as classical music—which resonated with Iranian audiences to a degree neither Soviet nor Iranian organizers had expected—and exchange programs without immediate political overtones, such as in the realm of sports or scholarship on historical and philological topics.

This account relies primarily on previously unstudied documents from the State Committee on Cultural Ties with Foreign Countries, which operated under the Council of Ministers of the USSR, conversations with participants in Soviet cultural diplomacy programs in Iran, Cold War publications and recent scholarly analyses.

The Roots of Post-War Cultural Efforts—Enthusiasm Turns to Disillusion

The Iranian body curating cultural relations with the Soviet Union was the *Anjoman-e ravābet-e farhangi-ye irān bā ettehād-e shuravi* (Society for Cultural Relations between Iran and the Soviet Union).⁶ It was founded in Tehran in 1943 and registered in 1944, driven by Iranian initiative and significant Soviet encouragement and support.⁷ Past, often brutal repressions of socialist sentiment by Reza Shah coupled with new political freedoms and the victory of the Red Army at Stalingrad were fueling pro-Soviet enthusiasm among the Iranian intelligentsia and artistic community, already sympathetic to leftist principles and admirers of Russian literature.⁸ A key role in the creation of the organization was played by individuals such as Mohammad Taqi Bahār; Saʿid Nafisi, who proposed writing a new *Shāh-nāme* about the Battle of Stalingrad; and the outstanding Iranian prose writer of the twentieth century, Sādeq Hedāyat, whose short story “āb-e zendegi,” or “Water of Life,” was inspired by the Battle of Stalingrad and featured a “country of eternal hope” standing in for the Soviet Union.⁹

The Society worked closely with the Soviet umbrella organization, the All-Union Society of Cultural Ties Abroad (*Vsesoyuznoe obschestvo kulturnoi svyazi c zagranitsei*, VOKS), founded in 1925.¹⁰ VOKS supported, directed and supplied materials for the Society for Cultural Relations much as the British Council did for the Anglo-Persian Institute (established in Iran in 1942). The US State Department also supported an Iran-America Society (established in 1946).¹¹ But unlike the British and US cultural centers, the Iran-Soviet Cultural Society was officially an Iranian organization with an Iranian director, although there were also Soviet citizens on staff and the USSR clearly provided guidance and financial support, such as assisting with rent for the premises.¹² Perhaps the USSR did not found its own official cultural center as a kind of extended *korenizatsiya*, the early Bolshevik anti-colonial policy of “indigenization.” The Soviet approach generally was more “immersive”: while it seems that American and British cultural representatives often did not know Persian or have a background in Iranian studies, Soviet staffers were usually fluent.¹³ Boundaries between Soviet and Iranian identities were also deemphasized in ways that would have been impossible in relation to the United States and Britain simply due to geography. Soviet republics with historical ties to Iran, such as Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan, were given special emphasis—a carryover from prewar Soviet propaganda efforts. The Society encouraged writers, such as Saʿid Nafisi and Sādeq Hedāyat, to travel to the Soviet Republics and to write about their experiences.

According to its charter, the Society’s goal was the development and strengthening of cultural ties between the peoples of Iran and the USSR, for which it had the right to hold lectures and events about the Soviet Union and to translate Soviet literature into Persian and Iranian literature into the languages of the peoples of the USSR. It organized plays, concerts and sporting events, provided assistance to figures in the sciences, art and literature, and organized special courses for the study of Russian in Iran.¹⁴ Over the years, a library comprising thousands of volumes was collected.¹⁵

A Persian language periodical, *Payām-e no*, was published, which devoted half of its material to Iranian and half to Soviet topics. In later years it would have to soften its

tone, but in 1946, Sādeq Hedāyat published a story entitled “fardā” or “Tomorrow,” depicting the beating of an Iranian woman by a drunken American soldier and the subsequent beating of an Iranian man who tries to defend her.¹⁶ *Payām-e no* was later shut down by the Iranian authorities, then re-launched under the name *Payām-e novīn*, but the *Tudeh* party and politics in general were off-limits in the new periodical.¹⁷ The magazine had an Iranian editor with some Soviet citizens on staff who provided materials about the Soviet economy and scientific achievements, as well as short stories and talks by cultural figures that were translated into Persian. The magazine was distributed to libraries and educational facilities and by subscription.¹⁸ As on other fronts, there was an American counterpart: “Iran and the USA” was published in Farsi and English from 1946, although it appears to have lasted only about two years.

Before Stalin’s delayed withdrawal of Soviet troops and machinations in Iranian Azerbaijan, the Society rode a wave of pro-Soviet sentiment that brought rapid openings of branches in other Iranian cities and rural areas, although the extent to which the many branches and sub-branches were effective and sustained is unclear.¹⁹ Based on the model of the Cultural Society, in April 1945 the *anjoman-e farhangi-ye kurdistan va shuravi* (Kurdistan-Soviet Cultural Relations Association) was founded, and a VOKS office functioned in Iranian Azerbaijan, headed by the Soviet consul in Rezaiyeh.²⁰ A telling indicator of the impact of Soviet cultural policy at the time—or at least of the concern that it elicited—was that the Iranian authorities considered Kurdish independence efforts to be at least partially a consequence of the Mahabad office of the Cultural Society.²¹

One of the Society’s early triumphs was holding the First Congress of Iranian Writers in 1946, to which seventy-eight writers and poets were invited, among them luminaries of Iran’s literary scene. Russian and Soviet literature and ideas were prominently discussed, such as socialist realism and the critical approaches of Chernyshevsky and Belinsky. *Tudeh* members and leftist writers were not the only attendees, and the congress displayed a variety of viewpoints. Intellectual historian Ali Gheissari sees the congress as representative of a unique moment in Iran’s relationship with leftism and the Soviet Union: the mutual tolerance of the participants “disappeared in later years as literary occasions and associations of intellectuals became increasingly doctrinaire in their political outlook ... The congress was one of those rare moments that not only encapsulates a period, but also hints at what is to come.”²²

Strategies for Treading Lightly

Iranian power structures were wary of foreign propaganda efforts by all embassies and foreign cultural organizations, especially in the postwar decade. American embassy dispatches note warnings by Iranian officials that outright anti-Soviet propaganda would not be tolerated,²³ and the Iranian government placed even greater restrictions on Soviet cultural organizations, even during the period of the shah’s “disappointment” with US policy in the late 1950s.²⁴ The Society and its publications made a point of avoiding direct promotion of communist ideology and references to the *Tudeh* party.²⁵ Concern over the appeal and effects of Soviet influence stemmed, naturally,

from the historical context of Iran's relations with the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire but also from external pressures as Cold War tensions mounted. In addition to outwardly sidelining politics, the Society protected itself from government restrictions by forging alliances with influential counterweight elements, such as those within the army and the shah's circle. This began early, as noted by Iran scholar James Pickett in describing the Society's spread prior to the Azeri crisis in 1946: "The Society was careful to involve the regional civilian or military authorities as members of the governing board of the Society branch, which—particularly in the northern regions—would not have been difficult."²⁶ Iranians with Russian connections were also often involved. The first postwar chairman of the Society was Amānullā Jahānbāni. Born in the 1890s, Amānullā had not only received a military education in pre-revolutionary Russia and served with Russians in the Cossack Brigade, but he was married to a Russian, Elena Kasminskaya. A subsequent chairman was Abdol Hossein Masud Ansari, who had studied in St. Petersburg, where his father had worked as an Iranian diplomat in tsarist Russia. He was governor of Rasht during the Azeri crisis in 1946 and would later become Iranian ambassador to the Soviet Union and enjoy warm relations with Nikita Khrushchev.

Gennady Avdeev, an Iran scholar who worked for the Society in the 1960s and 1970s, commented:

Of course, an individual with his [Jahānbāni's] biography provided protection²⁷ for the activities of our association. SAVAK arrested attendees at our events in droves. So that kind of person with that kind of authority offered some protection in a situation where counter-espionage was running wild. In a word, he saved us from SAVAK. He also provided access to certain circles, which was advantageous for our government ...

He [Jahānbāni] assisted with cultural ties, and so it was a deliberate policy. [Those connections] reined in SAVAK, so that there were no beatings and such. SAVAK did its work, kept watch on those who came to our library, were registered with us, etc. That was clear. They were partially controlled by the CIA. But [the connections] helped us to maintain an umbrella for our work. We understood this very well, and thus we gave the shah a warm reception. Jahānbāni also came [to the USSR] on official visits; and when Abdol Hossein Ansari came, he was received at the highest level. He was taken to meetings at the Supreme Soviet of the USSR ... They were sent to our resorts to vacation. The Fourth Directorate provided medical care.²⁸ In a word, they were received with the utmost respect.²⁹

Films and plays had to be green-lighted by inspectors of the Iranian Ministry of Education prior to being shown,³⁰ and the teaching of any subject other than the Russian language required separate Iranian approval. While adults could attend courses, high school students needed their headmasters' permission. The Iranian Ministry of Education also reserved the right to approve syllabi, and formal group discus-

sions outside the program were officially prohibited. What is more, it was reported to Moscow, the Iranian authorities employed other, unofficial deterrents: often putting those who attended events sponsored by Soviet-Iranian organizations under surveillance and even sanctioning provocations targeting those events.³¹ Grant Voskanyan, who worked at the Society from the late 1950s to the late 1960s as a deputy representative, deputy editor at the periodical *Payām-e no*, and a Russian language teacher, recalled:

Parents would come in the next day and tell us: “Our son was supposed to attend a film screening here (or a lecture or something else), but he didn’t return home. Do you know why?” ... We saw that SAVAK was operating—waiting in a car and letting people go in, then grabbing them on their way out. In general, they wanted to shut down the association. And [eventually] they did.³²

The Pivotal Year of 1953

In historian Artemy Kalinovsky’s words: “Moscow’s policy between 1947 and 1952 was focused on protecting its (limited) economic interests and keeping a watchful eye on the British and American presence in Iran”; and from the Iranian perspective, in the succinct formulation of Mohammad Mahdiyān: “Until the last days of Stalin’s life, relations between Iran and the USSR were extremely tense.”³³ Nineteen fifty-three marked a turning point in the cultural contest of the superpowers in Iran: Stalin died and with him the weariness at the prospect of attempting serious policy goals or outreach in Iran after the post-war failure to gain oil concessions; then Mosaddeq was toppled by the other two major foreign players, which in contrast to the Soviets had intensified their efforts at influence. While the powers that be in Tehran were now beholden to the US—which, in the words of one US diplomatic officer, had gone from being “a very large player” to “the player” in Iran—the Americans and especially the British were newly tarnished after the coup.³⁴ In the fallout over the oil dispute, the British Council closed from 1952 to 1955. But the Soviets, having sat this intervention out, had a new leadership and outlook with Khrushchev and saw an opportunity to step up their efforts on the cultural front, efforts that soon began to bear fruit.³⁵

Just months after Stalin’s death in 1953, Tehran university professor Ali-Asghar Hekmat led an Iranian delegation to Moscow.³⁶ In 1954, the “Soviet-Iranian Agreement on Regulating Border and Financial Issues” was signed, which contributed to easing political tensions that had arisen due to the Iranian government’s crackdown on the *Tudeh* party and Soviet sympathizers in the wake of Mosaddeq’s overthrow—a crackdown that also led to the temporary closure of the Cultural Relations Society.³⁷ A year later, however, the shah and his wife made a historic visit to the USSR.

The Soviet mindset was undergoing changes as part of the “de-Stalinization” process. At the same Twentieth Party Congress in 1956 in which Stalin’s “Cult of

Personality” was denounced, presidium member Anastas Mikoyan declared, “The East has awakened, yet our scholars of the East still sleep.” There was a growing opinion that Soviet orientalism had slipped back into “antiquarian philological interests” and away from “contemporary political problems.”³⁸ That “outdated” mode of studying the East had been rejected by the Soviets once already, in the 1920s with the rise of “Red Orientalism,” but the Stalinist purges had emptied the corridors of the Institute of Oriental Studies in Moscow.

On the diplomatic side, in 1957, the Communist Party leadership determined that VOKS was also “out of touch” and transformed it into a new organization: the Union of Soviet Societies of Friendship and Cultural Ties with Foreign Countries (*Soyuz sovetskikh obshchestv druzhby i kul'turnoi svyazi s zarubezhnyimi stranami*, SSOD). The new incarnation was to foster less formal, more open and more vibrant cultural ties abroad and usher in new forms of cultural contact.³⁹

All of the major “cultural contestants” in Iran engaged in a variety of forms of cultural outreach, from classical music to athletics, but each knew its forte: Iran’s political elite had a soft spot for Britain, and despite the accompanying mistrust, Britain was still considered the “imperialist power par excellence.”⁴⁰ The British were the standard bearers of the ever more prestigious English language, offering English classes in multiple Iranian cities, and were the heirs of Shakespeare. The Anglo-Iranian Drama Society staged Shakespeare’s *Othello* and Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* in Tehran in 1946—in Persian with a Persian cast—and a later Council representative in Iran was a leading Shakespeare scholar.⁴¹ The Americans had a magnetic, if not old and august, pop culture exemplified by Hollywood; and the Soviet Union, alongside the shared Persianate heritage in the Caucasus and Central Asia, boasted an excellent reputation in high art: literature, classical music and thought-provoking cinema.⁴²

“The Most Important of the Arts”: Cinema

Cinematic competition between Soviet, American and British representatives in Iran began during World War II, with newsreel footage of their respective military exploits against the Axis.⁴³ In 1950, the Cultural Society organized the first festival of Soviet cinema, the opening of which was held in the VOKS house of culture in Tehran and attended by the Iranian foreign minister as well as around 500 members of the Cultural Society.⁴⁴ Included in the repertoire were documentaries about life in the republics of the Soviet Union, such as Tajikistan. Aside from the festival, regular screenings of Soviet films (dubbed and later subtitled in Persian) were soon being held in a special building the Cultural Society rented for cinema and theatrical performances; and in the summertime, screenings were held outdoors in a garden. Soviet fare generally resonated most with the less numerous educated classes—the same strata that made up the *Tudeh* party.⁴⁵ Members of the Russian diaspora in Iran also frequently attended. In the realm of cinema, however, promulgators of Soviet culture faced stiff competition from the Americans, even though screenings of Soviet films were mostly free of charge. Well aware of the entertainment cachet of Hollywood, the US embassy in Tehran rec-

commended coopting Mickey Mouse and Walt Disney himself for the US propaganda effort.⁴⁶ The Soviets also knew their strong suit and aimed at a different segment of the cultural “market.” In his magisterial work on the history of Iranian cinema, Hamid Naficy notes the difference in spirit between Soviet and American film selections:

The social realism of [Soviet] movies ... provided a contrast to the gritty realism of Hollywood crime and gangster movies, which were popular. If the American practice of importing morally suspect fiction films ... and educationally valuable documentaries on health and development seemed perplexing to Iranian jurists, Sovkino’s importation of movies into Iran appeared consistent and carefully calibrated to Iranian taste. It included not only war movies, but also movies about the noble society of patriots, Central Asian fairy tales, or innocent scenes of forest and deep-sea life.⁴⁷

Avdeev recalled that

a great number of films were shown. Just about every week, we had two or three screenings of dramatic and documentary films. And so the young people loved it. Especially when we showed *The Battleship Potemkin*—it created an absolute furor. People were practically crawling over the walls to get onto the grounds.⁴⁸

Music—The Universal Language

The high caliber of Soviet performers and Russian and Soviet composers of classical music made tours abroad by Soviet artists not only popular but “one of the most important channels of propaganda outside the Soviet sphere of influence,”⁴⁹ providing something of an answer to the infectious dominance of American popular culture. What’s more, classical music was, at least ostensibly, removed from any political ideology. In 1954, the Bolshoi Theater troupe, along with star dancer Maya Plisetskaya, performed in India. One Indian paper declared that “the tour refuted the assertion of ‘enemies of the Soviet Union’ that Soviet art was ‘all propaganda and not art.’”⁵⁰ In 1955, Soviet musicians toured the United States to much acclaim. American embassy personnel in Iran were well aware of its draw and worked to take the shine off of the Soviets’ new showpiece. A recently declassified dispatch from the US embassy in Tehran from 1953, noting the difficulties in pursuing outright anti-Soviet propaganda due to Iran’s official policy of neutrality, reported that “subtle anti-Communist activity has been carried on through the weekly music programs [sponsored by the US embassy]. No opportunity to point out how Soviet Russia controls her artists is overlooked in the music program notes.”⁵¹

Thus it was no accident that, after a long and difficult period in relations with Iran, Moscow turned to its musicians for a “restart.” In early January of 1957, a group of Soviet artists arrived in Iran with People’s Artist of the USSR⁵² and Bolshoi

Theater soloist Pavel Lisitsian,⁵³ violinist Galina Barinova, pianist Tamara Guseva and concert master Naum Valter, all competition laureates celebrated in the Soviet Union.⁵⁴ On the heels of that concert, in the autumn of 1957 and at the invitation of the Tehran Philharmonic Society, celebrated Soviet violinist Leonid Kogan visited with his wife—also a renowned violinist, Yelizaveta Gilel's⁵⁵—and pianist Andrei Mytnik. Kogan gave three concerts: at the Tehran Philharmonic Society, at the Cultural Society, for the Soviet community in Tehran, and for the shah.

As was often the case for Soviet-sponsored events, publicity for the concerts was weak. They were intended for a relatively small circle of music fans and were only announced on small posters and in two evening newspapers—on the last page and in small print. Nor did the Soviet Ministry of Culture send any publicity materials about Kogan to Tehran despite requests by the Soviet embassy long before his arrival.⁵⁶ If this was due to low expectations of interest among Iranians, Kogan's first concert demonstrated there were many more classical music enthusiasts in Iran than had been anticipated. The concert was attended by members of the Tehran Philharmonic Society, the heads of the Cultural Society, senators and deputies of the Majlis, members of the diplomatic corps and other representatives of the Iranian elite and intelligentsia. Kogan played every concert to a packed house, with additional chairs brought in to accommodate the overflow crowd. After the last number, the audience remained in their seats demanding encores. Listeners gave an especially warm welcome to Kogan's performances of Soviet composers Prokofiev, Khachaturian and Shostakovich, who were being heard for the first time in Iran.⁵⁷

On 26 October 1957, Kogan was invited to give a concert for the shah, who was celebrating his birthday. Guests included the shah's family and select members of the Iranian government, as well as King Faisal of Iraq. No representatives from the Soviet embassy or other diplomatic corps were invited, but Kogan must have told the embassy about the experience, as the attaché reported details to Moscow. The Soviet artists were treated as important guests rather than performers. Before and after the concert, the shah and his wife chatted with them at length—the shah's wife interpreting between Kogan and the shah, as she knew German. In her name, all of the artists were given gold watches.⁵⁸

In addition to concerts, Kogan heard several Iranian violinists, gave them advice on technique, and discussed the educational system in the USSR. As was noted in the report by the Soviet embassy in Iran, "the performances by the Soviet violinist L. B. Kogan in Iran helped to popularize the achievements of Soviet musical art among the Iranian population and were a positive, productive contribution to developing cultural ties between the USSR and Iran."⁵⁹

The Iranian press also noted the great success of the concerts. Reviews were published in the major newspapers of Tehran—*Ettelā'āt*, *Keyhān* and *Post-e tebrān*. The magazines *Omid-e irān* and *Sinemā* devoted entire articles to Kogan's performance. *Omid-e irān* wrote on 3 November 1957: "Kogan is a superb violinist, the likes of which Iran has not ever seen. Not only that, but the majority of his concert pieces had never been performed in Iran before. Kogan's visit to Iran is a great event for music fans."⁶⁰

Thus, Kogan, a much-honored musician within the Soviet Union and winner of numerous international competitions, became the first world-class violinist to perform in Iran. Back home, he soon earned the title of People's Artist of the USSR and accepted a professorship at the Moscow Conservatory.⁶¹

The program had consisted of European and Russian classical music, and works by Soviet composers.⁶² This was a typical selection for Soviet performers abroad that might include Brahms and Beethoven, Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff, and Shostakovich and Prokofiev.⁶³ The same tripartite repertoire was to be codified in the rules of the first International Tchaikovsky Competition held a year later in Moscow (which Kogan and Gile's brother were instrumental in structuring⁶⁴). Historian of Soviet music Kiril Tomoff explains how these three musical traditions, reflected in the three rounds of the competition, projected a Soviet self-conception extending beyond music:

Soviet culture was constituted in part by the appropriation of the classics of the Russian canon and of select strains of Western culture. Contemporary Soviet culture was supposed to be the inheritor and ideal extension of this combined tradition. Starting with a first round comprising technical works, progressing to a second round in which national traditions (dominated by the Russian classics) were presented, and concluding with a third round that combined Tchaikovsky with new Soviet music that cast Soviet culture as the pinnacle of a universally inclusive musical tradition with origins in the West but with global significance.⁶⁵

Regardless of whether all of that was grasped by audiences—and to what extent that entire message was consciously intended—such a program conveyed a sense of building and progression beyond a western European foundation that would certainly have been palpable; and the formula seemed to work, judging by the popularity of the performances. Moreover, the ideological component was not blatant and could be ignored without lessening enjoyment of the program.

Kogan was not the only Soviet star to grace the Iranian musical scene. In late December 1962, at the invitation of the Tehran Philharmonic Society, renowned violinist and winner of scores of international competitions Rafail Sobolevsky⁶⁶ performed several concerts that proved immensely popular.⁶⁷ Iranian music critics were again impressed, noting that Tehran was rarely visited by musicians of such high caliber.⁶⁸

The demand for Soviet musicians in Iran was such that tickets for concerts were sold without discounts. On the other hand, the Philharmonic Society gave its members free tickets for concerts by other foreign artists, or offered considerable discounts, yet these took place in half-empty halls. Whether or not opinions were changing in Iran about the Soviet Union politically, representatives of the Tehran Philharmonic Society noted that thanks to the performances by Soviet artists, their own ticket sales were up;⁶⁹ and archive records show that in May 1964 the Iranian embassy in the USSR inquired as to whether a job might be found at the

Bolshoi Theater in Moscow for the Iranian citizen Hāydeh Changiziān, who was at the time training at the ballet school in Cologne.⁷⁰ The Ministry of Culture enrolled her in the Leningrad Choreography Academy for six months.⁷¹ Soviet classical music enjoyed similar popularity in other parts of the world and the East. This was noted not only by US embassy observers, but US academics, who sometimes adopted a line not far removed from that of government employees. Barghoorn wrote in 1960 that

Soviet cultural diplomacy is often tinged by what non-communists, at least, can only describe as deception. In large part, its task is to establish in the minds of its targets associations between, for example, classical Russian music and the Kremlin's alleged desire for peace.⁷²

Folk and popular musicians from the southern Soviet republics also visited Iran. Much has been written about how the Soviet Union, with its vast borders encompassing a rich variety of cultures, leveraged its “cultural proximity”—in this case, the cultural and historical overlap between Central Asia and Iran. East and West, folk and high art, tradition and modernity were often merged.⁷³ A Tajik ensemble of thirty singers and dancers gave repeated performances of ethnic Tajik song and dance as well as arias from European operas in the original European languages, which was quite striking for Iranian audiences. According to Voskanyan, Iranians “would question us about the Tajiks, who had an opera house, a theater, and an academy of sciences: ‘How can that be?’ ... In Iran at that time, *farangistān* had broken down.”⁷⁴ The showcasing of Tajikistan's cultural infrastructure and modernization was the cultural analogue to the showcasing of its industrial infrastructure and modernization.

The performances by People's Artist of the USSR Rashid Majid Ogly Behbudov were also enthusiastically met. He toured Iran for over two months, from 10 December 1962 to 13 February 1962, giving eighteen concerts in Tehran, Isfahan, Shiraz and Abadan, which were attended by a total of over 20,000 people. He also performed on Iranian television during the tour. Behbudov, an ethnic Azeri, was eager to visit Iranian Azerbaijan, but the Iranian authorities, wary of Behbudov's popularity, refused on the grounds of unrest in the region and granted him permission to perform in Abadan instead.⁷⁵

Exchanges and reports by Soviet diplomats at the time emphasized the strong impression Behbudov and Sobolevsky had made in Iran, and noted the “favorable opportunities for nurturing cultural, and in particular musical ties between the USSR and Iran,” urging the corresponding bodies in the Soviet government to assist in strengthening this aspect of Iranian-Soviet ties.⁷⁶ They took special note of the “effects of the trip by Behbudov, demonstrating that the art of musicians of Transcaucasian and Central Asian republics is very popular in Iran, especially among wide swaths of the population.”⁷⁷

Iranian-Soviet Intellectual Exchanges

In addition to *Payām-e novin* in Farsi, Soviet periodicals in English and French also played a role in disseminating information about the USSR, particularly among Iranian academics. Keenly aware of the sensitive political environment, Soviet diplomats in Tehran advised against sending classics of Marxism-Leninism and other political literature, which the Communist Party had proposed for distribution in Iran, and instead requested the magazines *Sovetskii Soyuz* and *Novoe vremya* in English and French, which were popular among Iranian readers,⁷⁸ and were characterized by a mild ideological approach devoid of outright propaganda, focusing on foreign, primarily western readers.

From the 1960s, cooperation between Soviet and Iranian scholarly institutions and scholars developed actively in various disciplines of eastern studies, primarily Iranian studies, which since the nineteenth century had been energetically pursued in Russia and the Soviet Union, where innovative work was being done in the study of Iranian literature and history using modern methodology and mining the enormous stock of Persian manuscripts and literary masterpieces preserved in Russia and the USSR.⁷⁹

Scholarly work on Iran was disseminated through book exchanges. The Institute of the Peoples of Asia (IPA) of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR (now the Institute of Oriental Studies and the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Sciences)⁸⁰ worked with Tehran and Isfahan universities, the National Library of Iran, *Anjoman-e ketāb* (Book Society of Iran), the Iranian Society for the Study of Ancient Iran, and a number of renowned scholars and cultural figures—Professor Saʿid Nafisi,⁸¹ Professor Afshār, Dr. Yarshater, Professor Roknzādeh Ādamiyyat and the Assyrian public figure L. Teimurazova, among others. As was noted in an IPA letter to the Communist Party, these ties greatly facilitated the spread of information about the achievements of Soviet scholars and helped to establish friendly relations.⁸² At the same time, cooperation was initially established with caution. In 1959, Tehran University placed an order only for the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* and a few other books, but by March 1961 numerous university publications and reference books were being exchanged.

Soon the IPA was sending Iranian universities publications by its own researchers as well as from the Academies of Sciences of neighboring republics, including facsimile publications of Persian classics (Saʿdi and Ferdowsi), studies by Soviet scholars on the history, language and economy of Iran, and translations of works of Oriental authors; and Iranian publications were making their way into libraries in Moscow, Leningrad, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan and other parts of the USSR.⁸³ At the request of Tehran University, eleven microfilms were prepared of ancient Persian manuscripts held in the Leningrad department of the IPA. This gift was presented on 18 September 1962 to the rector of Tehran University, Dr. Farhād, by the embassy of the USSR in Tehran in the presence of the chairman of the Cultural Society, General Jahānbāni, the director of the shah's library, Dr. Mehdi Bāyāni, the director of the National Library of Iran, Professor Iraj Afshār, and a number of other scholarly elite. For the

USSR, book exchanges and international library ties were one of the most important—and least expensive—areas of cultural cooperation with foreign countries.⁸⁴ The USSR had become the world leader in volumes of books published and boasted a vast, well-organized library network.⁸⁵

Regular ties were also established between the IPA and Isfahan University, including a lively book exchange with *Anjoman-e ketāb*, which received works by Ignaty Krachkovsky, Eugene Bertel's and other prominent scholars; facsimile publications of manuscripts of classic Iranian, Arabic and other works; and studies by Soviet scholars on oriental languages, the Ancient East and other topics. There was an exchange of publications with the Iranian Society for the Study of the Culture of Ancient Iran. The IPA also worked with the Cultural Society and the representative of the Union of Societies of Friendship of the USSR⁸⁶ in Iran. Cultural Society Secretary Ziyuallāh Forushāni provided assistance to IPA scholars preparing a large Persian dictionary for publication, sending them forty-five Iranian school textbooks.⁸⁷ Close ties were established with Professor Sa'īd Nafisi, who was sent Soviet literature on Ancient Iran and Central Asia, and archeological and ethnographical works collected by an expedition to Khorezm. A systematic exchange of Assyriology materials was coordinated with L. Teimurazova, who gave many Assyrian publications to the IPA that were not previously available in the USSR.⁸⁸

In 1963, a year after a second Iran-Soviet détente was inaugurated with the shah's pledge not to host foreign missile bases on Iranian territory,⁸⁹ the Society of Cultural Ties with Iran (SOKSI) was opened as a successor organization to the Society for Cultural Relations between Iran and the USSR. It later opened offices in USSR republics.⁹⁰

In the mid-1960s, new visits by Soviet Iran specialists to Iran began. While Soviet Iranian studies was closely and unapologetically linked with state policy, by focusing on classical Persian literature, Soviet scholarship was able to present a less politicized face.⁹¹ What's more, research in the Soviet Union on classical Persian culture, grounded as it was in the rich orientalist tradition developed in the Russian Empire, was a strong point.

In October 1964, Rustam Aliyev, a well-respected specialist in Persian classical literature and a senior research fellow at the IPA, was sent to Iran for two weeks to give lectures.⁹² During the previous decade, not a single Soviet Iranian studies scholar had made an official visit to Iran. Now Aliyev was to be granted unprecedented opportunities to meet with students, scholars and cultural figures, and to communicate via radio with wide swaths of the Iranian population.⁹³

Before his departure for Iran, Aliyev was prepped by the leadership of the IPA to stress—in as much detail as possible—the achievements of Soviet Iranian studies.⁹⁴ During his two-week stay, he acquainted Iranian scholars with the main works of Soviet Iranian studies for the first time. He met with scholars and students at Tehran University, discussing the publication of canonical Iranian literature in the USSR—the preparation of critical texts of the poets Rudaki, Ferdowsi, Khayyām, Sa'di, Dehlawi and others—and the study of the languages and ancient history of Iran.⁹⁵ He also delivered a lecture on “The Development of Soviet Iranian Studies”

to almost the entire humanities faculty of Tehran University and over 500 students. This was the first time that such a large group of Iranian scholars had had the opportunity to learn directly about Soviet scholarship. According to a report in Russian archives, after Aliyev's lecture, the dean of the literature faculty of Tehran University stated that

What Aliyev has told us here surprised and to some extent shamed us. It surprised us that major work is underway in the Soviet Union on the study of the history of our culture, language and people, that an enormous number of books, monographs and other scholarly works are being published, but that we know almost nothing about these works. And it shamed us because Soviet scholars study and research our great culture better than we do ourselves.⁹⁶

These encounters aroused enormous interest and numerous questions, it was reported back to Moscow. As Soviet Iranian studies scholars had done extensive work in establishing authoritative texts for many of the classics of Persian literature, such as the *Shāh-nāme*, Aliyev was asked to deliver a lecture on the principles of preparing and publishing texts. This lecture was recorded on tape for subsequent publication, and Aliyev received an invitation to speak at Isfahan University and on the radio program *Marzhā-ye dānesh* (The Limits of Knowledge) on the topic "Tajikistan and Iranian Studies in the USSR."⁹⁷ The program was hugely popular in Iran, and only the most outstanding Iranian scholars appeared. Aliyev was the first foreign scholar to be invited, and according to reports from Soviet observers, his radio lecture captivated listeners, who sent numerous letters to the station requesting a repeat of the broadcast.

Aliyev also spoke at Isfahan University. A Soviet diplomatic report enthused that the event was attended not only by professors, students and graduates of the university, but also poets, writers, journalists and other representatives of the intelligentsia, and practically the entire city government (the mayor, police chief and other officials)—over 1,000 people.⁹⁸ Aliyev's tour included a talk at the Soviet embassy on the topic of "The Achievements of Soviet Iranian Studies and their Significance in Strengthening Cultural Ties," and at the Cultural Society on "The Study of Iranian Culture in the USSR," which drew around 550 people—many from the Iranian intelligentsia, it was reported.⁹⁹

Aliyev did make a foray out of the classical past, noting the great popularity of the "new style" in poetry among young Iranian poets and students, formed under the influence of the work of Mayakovsky, Nazim Hikmet and progressive French poetry, which broke the canons of classical poetry; but he did not suggest cooperation with Iranian universities in the study of contemporary Iranian poetry, in light of the ongoing battle in university circles against the "new poetry."¹⁰⁰

A month after Aliyev's return, Gafurov sent a report on the trip to the State Committee for Cultural Ties With Foreign Countries¹⁰¹ that included Aliyev's account of comments made to him upon departure from Iran:

On 29 October, I flew out of Iran. Among those seeing me off at the airport was the Shah's representative for cultural issues, Shujā ad-Din Shafā. Before I boarded, he told me "... your lectures brought me great pleasure. Thanks to the lectures, we learned that classical Persian literature is respected and valued in the Soviet Union, and is thus studied there more than in any other country. Our perception of Soviet Iranian studies has fundamentally changed. You study our country and culture not with some other motivations in mind, as is the case in certain other countries, but because of a sincere respect for Iranian culture. We promise to make every effort toward the expansion of the exchange program of scholars and scholarly cooperation."¹⁰²

Similar sentiments were expressed by other officials and scholars, such as the deputy minister of information, the mayor of Isfahan, and the heads of Tehran and Isfahan universities.¹⁰³

The visit had produced the right impression, according to the gushing reports sent to Moscow. Soviet scholarship in general did not receive the amount of international recognition that might have been expected due to lack of publications in English and western European languages, in addition to political factors.¹⁰⁴ While Soviet bureaucrats recognized the need to build contacts with the Iranian scholarly world, they were often lackadaisical in following up on Iranian interest. Among the few works by Soviet scholars that found their way to the general Iranian readership, the most in demand were critical texts and commentaries on Rudaki, Ferdowsi, Khayyām and Sa'di.¹⁰⁵ The entire print run of the first two volumes of the *Shāh-nāme* had sold out in days, Aliyev was informed by owners of the well-known Iranian bookshops Tahuri, Ibn-Sinā and Kāshāni. The critical text of the *Gulistān* had been snapped up by readers with similar speed, prompting Tahuri to send off an order for 5,000 copies to the Soviet Union. But the owner complained to Aliyev that three years had passed without any reply. Nor was his the only bookshop to request more copies in vain. Several publishers independently reprinted the Persian text of the book, omitting the entire Russian text—to some extent apparently driven to piracy.¹⁰⁶ The reason for the poor distribution of Soviet books in this case was not a lack of interest among Iranian readers or any obstacles caused by the Iranian authorities but the passive attitude of the Soviet organizations responsible for the export of books, in accord with the modest expectations of their superiors regarding Soviet-Iranian relations.¹⁰⁷

The heads of most scholarly institutions in Iran, despite some hindrances by the Iranian authorities, strove to work more closely with Soviet scholars and scholarly institutions, but cooperation was stymied by the lack of sufficient information in university circles about Iranian studies in the Soviet Union. Iranian universities and scholars repeatedly requested Soviet scholars to send their books to Iran and write articles for university journals, with inconsistent responses.¹⁰⁸

Despite increased book exchanges, the relative scarcity of libraries in Iran, a lack and politicization of funds, and the exclusive use of the Russian language also limited the distribution of works by Soviet Iranian studies scholars. The forewords and commen-

raries to these books were published in Russian, which forced interested Iranian scholars and readers to resort to translators, of which there were precious few: Tehran University possessed only one specialist in Russian language and literature.¹⁰⁹ Aliyev urged that in the future Soviet scholars provide at least a brief outline in Persian, since even English and French still had a limited readership in Iran. Furthermore, Iranian university journals should be used as a forum where Soviet Iran scholars could publish articles and reports, annotations of books, and monographs and anthologies devoted to Iran—especially as Tehran and Isfahan universities expressed a readiness to publish such materials.¹¹⁰

At Isfahan University, a Russian language department was opened thanks to the efforts of the rector—an Iranian scholar sympathetic to the USSR, Professor ‘Abbās Fāruqi. Shiraz University, on the other hand, was strongly under the influence of the United States, which gave the university significant financial support. Aliyev reported that faculty from the Literature Department of Shiraz University told him that they could not publish works in university publications with references to Soviet scholars.¹¹¹

A major role in developing Soviet-Iranian ties in Iranian studies was played by the Soviet delegation to the International Congress of Iranian Studies in Tehran, which took place from 31 August to 7 September 1966.¹¹² The stated task of the congress was to collate the works of Iranian studies specialists the world over for the preparation of a detailed and all-encompassing history of Iran, i.e. an economic and social history, including the history of Iranian languages and culture, literature, fine arts and sciences. The official languages of the congress were Persian, English and French.¹¹³ None other than Shah Mohammed Rezā Pahlavi gave the opening speech for the event, which saw the participation of 126 foreign scholars from thirty foreign countries and 101 from Iran.¹¹⁴

The Soviet delegation included Aliyev, who continued his previous work of familiarizing Iranians with Soviet Iranian studies. The chairman of the delegation was Abdulgani Mirzoev, a professor at the Tajik SSR Academy of Sciences in Dushanbe.¹¹⁵ Initially, the chairman was to have been Bobojon Gafurov, the ethnically Tajik director of the Moscow Institute of Oriental Studies, but in the end he was to remain only an organizer.¹¹⁶ While documentation of the precise reason for Gafurov’s absence in Tehran has not been found, the replacement seems to have been motivated, again, by a desire to keep as far from politics as possible: Gafurov was known more as a politician than an academic.¹¹⁷ The Soviet embassy in Tehran had responsibility for coordinating the scholars’ visit and wanted all the papers thoroughly reviewed beforehand and any hint of ideology or “excessively strident expressions” removed.¹¹⁸ The majority of the papers were edited, some extensively so, and two were not advertised at all or given over for publication (although apparently delivered at the congress) because embassy staff felt they might be “interpreted as propaganda.”¹¹⁹

The avoidance of politically and ideologically sensitive topics had been employed earlier, in 1960 at the Twenty-fifth International Congress of Orientalists in Moscow, and it seemed to have gained Soviet scholarship increased respect.¹²⁰ Ironi-

cally, this pushed the scholars back into the fields of classical orientalism that had dominated tsarist-era Russian academia—ancient history, philology, high literature and art—the very opposite of the course toward contemporary studies that Mikoyan and others had called for in reforming Soviet orientalism. But it was a pragmatic tack.

Thus, at the plenary sessions of the congress, historiographical papers predominated. Each delegation was allowed one paper, and the Soviets chose Mirzoev's: "Literary Source Materials in Transoxiana from the 16th to early 20th Centuries and their Significance." The paper examined literary anthologies (*tazkereh*) hitherto little known or practically unknown in modern Iran that were devoted to Persian-language poets in Central Asia, India, Afghanistan and Iran. In the linguistic section, a paper was presented about an Aramaic inscription from the fifth century BC, in which the presence of an Iranian word was demonstrated and conclusions of a historical-linguistic nature were drawn. In the historical section, two papers were presented: "Concerning the Socio-Economic Periodization of the Seljuk Kingdom in Iraq" and "The Primary Historical Phases of Ancient and Medieval Iran." The Soviet delegation presented five papers on literature and art.¹²¹ Of all foreign delegations, the Soviets presented the most papers — nine in total — and, it was reported back to Moscow, attracted the largest audiences, who rated them highly.¹²² Eight out of the nine papers were read in Persian, and one paper was read in English, as a way of refuting comments heard at several previous international symposiums, and behind the scenes at the start of this congress, that the excellent command of Persian among Soviet specialists was accompanied by a poor command of English.¹²³

The Iranian delegation requested three members of the Soviet delegation (the largest number from one country) to read their papers on Iranian national radio. Congress participants from the USSR also spoke on Iranian television and discussed Soviet Iranian studies at a reception with the shah organized for the entire congress. The Soviet delegation noted in its report the personal interest the shah himself took in the delegates and their scholarly work and that he was well-informed about Soviet Iranian studies—which seemed a good sign politically.¹²⁴

The result was that by the end of the 1960s, according to Yuri Rubinchik, who paid a scholarly visit to Iran in 1968, many Iranian scholars were already well acquainted with Soviet literature on Iran and were following scholarly publications in the Soviet Union. Moreover, books by Soviet Iran specialists were now being published in Persian translation.¹²⁵

Physical Culture

Apart from the culture of the mind, the cultural détente did not overlook "physical culture," as it was called in the Soviet Union. The organization of Soviet-Iranian athletics events was facilitated by the fact the two successive heads of the Iranian Athletics Federation from the 1950s were Lieutenant General Amānullāh Jahānbāni (one of the first chairmen of the Cultural Society) and his son, General Nāder Jahānbāni. The

latter was also involved in the Cultural Society. It will be remembered that his mother was Russian. Also important was that fact that Nāder was deputy chief of the Iranian Air Force and was married to the shah's daughter.

The two countries organized numerous joint athletic events and programs. Wrestling, weightlifting and chess were the most popular sports, joined by football as it surged in popularity in the 1960s. Iranian athletes, primarily wrestlers and chess players, were regularly invited to take part in various tournaments in Tbilisi, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan and Moscow.¹²⁶ *Payām-e no* carried a chess column, and in the late 1950s Soviet grandmaster Serebrekov gave simultaneous chess exhibitions and lessons in Tehran and Isfahan.¹²⁷ In 1962 Iranian-Soviet competitions in freestyle wrestling and chess were held, and the Iranian Football Federation requested Soviet cooperation in organizing a tournament in Iran with a class A team from the USSR.¹²⁸ In late November of 1962, after the championship, Soviet premiere league team "Torpedo" visited Iran to play exhibition matches with teams from Tehran.¹²⁹

But it was wrestling that proved to have the greatest resonance between the two countries. Both were able to field some of the strongest wrestlers in international competition, and both had indigenous wrestling traditions. In the world freestyle wrestling championships in 1961, the Iranian team won first place, while the Soviet team took second. In 1962, the USSR took first place, while Iran took third.

In Iran, with its ancient system of athletic and moral fitness as practiced in the *zur-khāne* gymnasiums, wrestling is more than mere sport—as was noted time and again by Soviet athletes and observers. Arkady Lents, a Soviet wrestler and later trainer and judge, gave this description of wrestling matches in Iran from the 1960s:

Any match between Soviet and Iranian wrestlers takes place with a standing-room-only crowd, hundreds more would-be spectators packing the streets and [practically] laying siege to the venue ... They follow every movement on the mat, so one gets the impression the match is being judged not by five judges but by thousands of arbitrators.¹³⁰

Any good sports relationship needs a rivalry, and Iran and the USSR got theirs from two legendary figures in free-style wrestling: Gholāmrezā Takhti and Aleksandr Medved'. Takhti won Iran's first-ever Olympic medal with a silver in 1952 and followed with gold in 1956, alongside winning two world championships. He was known for his humility and generosity, a classic *javānmard*, and his biography would have put him on the fast track to party membership in the Soviet Union: the son of an ice-maker, he grew up in the working-class south of Tehran and was employed by the railroad.¹³¹ Legends abound of his sportsmanlike character: at a match in Moscow, "After defeating the then-world champion Anatoli Albul, Takhti saw the sorrow in the face of Albul's mother. Takhti went to her and said, 'I'm sorry about the result. Your son is a great wrestler.' She smiled and kissed him."¹³²

In 1961 Takhti defeated Soviet wrestler and future Olympic champion Boris Gur-evich for the world championship. In 1962 he had to defend his title against Aleksandr Medved' from Belarus. One version of events is that Medved', who had wrestled four matches that day, was suffering from a leg injury, and rather than exploit this Takhti chivalrously avoided his opponent's weak leg and thus ended up losing the match—which was a draw decided in favor of the wrestler with less body weight, i.e. Medved'.¹³³ One of the authors heard this account recently at the *zur-khāne* “Hazhir” in Takhti's stomping ground in the south of Tehran—given as an example of the priority placed on honor over victory in traditional Iranian wrestling. The “Hazhir” *zur-khāne* today has an active partnership with a wrestling gym in Medved's native Belarus, the fruit of Soviet-Iranian athletic cooperation during the 1960s.

Takhti wrestled Medved' again in Tehran. A Soviet Armenian wrestler and later trainer, born in Azerbaijan, Yuri Shakhmuradov, recalled the atmosphere at this match:

The shah entered the stadium—he was, incidentally, a huge sports fan. The crowd stood and erupted into applause. Fifteen minutes later Takhti appeared. He was given much more applause than the shah. After this, the shah stood up and left the complex.¹³⁴

Takhti wrestled aggressively this time, but Medved' won. The Iranian crowd, though devastated, was reported to be extremely respectful of the Soviet victor, and the Iranian team nonetheless beat the Soviet team on points.¹³⁵ To this day, Aleksandr Medved' maintains a friendship with the late Takhti's son.¹³⁶

Conclusion

Particularly in the early 1950s, certain political elements in Iran were interested in diversifying alliances and countering American and British influence. The Soviet Union offered the possibility of a counterweight, but Moscow often seemed surprisingly unresponsive.¹³⁷ If in the second half of the twentieth century Egypt, Syria and Algeria got Soviet military advisors, then Iran got Soviet violinists and scholars.¹³⁸ In contrast, the United States by the 1970s was making billion-dollar arms sales to Iran and running the largest English-language program abroad anywhere—with 20,000 students.¹³⁹ But for Moscow, relations with Iran were an arrangement of moderate expectations, far different from the ambitious earlier adventures in Gilan and the debacle in Iranian Azerbaijan. Avdeev sums up the guarded policy:

There was a tacit agreement that we would not engage in any propaganda against him [the shah], and [in return] our borders would stay quiet; and this satisfied everybody

We shared a vast border with Iran at the time; the Soviet Union stretched to the Caucasus and Central Asia. Thus for us, the issue of whether the shah was pro-western or not was not as pressing as the shah ensuring stability on our borders. So the set-up suited us well.¹⁴⁰

Even if their ideological component and effect on the Iranian population was inflated by western cold warriors, events sponsored by VOKS and later SSOD in Iran yielded unexpected and enduring fruits in cultural exchange. Determining the degree to which these cultural programs facilitated political breakthroughs would require a separate analysis, but Soviet foreign policymakers wanted to pave the way for economic and development cooperation with Iran as a way of at least loosening its US embrace: “For us, these [Khrushchev-era] years were preparation for developing economic ties,” according to Avdeev.¹⁴¹ Indeed, the 1960s saw a slew of agreements. In 1963, Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev visited Iran and the first significant economic and development agreement between the two countries in the post-war period was signed, for the construction of a dam, a water reservoir, two electrical stations, a sturgeon-breeding plant, grain elevators and other works along the shared border area. The USSR extended Iran a hefty twelve-year, low-interest loan for its share of the financing that could be repaid in Iranian goods. In 1964, an agreement was signed on sharing airspace; and in 1966, for the construction of a range of industrial complexes in Iran and a gas pipeline to the Soviet Union, again involving a low-interest Soviet loan.¹⁴²

Nāder Jahānbāni’s ties to the Soviet Union—and to America—would come back to haunt him after the Islamic revolution, when he was executed. One of the charges against him was that he had sought to place Iran under the direction of foreign powers. Another figure involved with the Cultural Society, the communist poet Siyāvash Kasrā’i who often published in *Payām-e novin*, took refuge in the Soviet Union with his family after the Islamic revolution. He was provided a three-room condominium in the center of Moscow.¹⁴³

Notes

1. Ivanov, *Ocherki istorii Irana*, 407-46; Orlov, *Vnesnnyaya politika Irana*; Blake, *The U.S.-Soviet Confrontation in Iran*.
2. Komissarov, *Sadek Hedayat: zhizn’ i tvorchestvo*, 147. In 1938, Majid Āhi was removed as minister of transportation and jailed for a time as a suspected Russophile. “ĀHI, MAJID,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/ahi-majid-1>
3. McFarland, “The Crisis in Iran,” 158.
4. Barghoorn, *The Soviet Cultural Offensive*, 1-2.
5. Department of State Transcript, “Working Group on Special Materials for Arab and Other Moslem Countries” [Attached to Cover Memorandum Dated April 2, 1952; Includes Attachment], April 1, 1952, 1; National Archives. Record Group 59. Records of the Department of State. Decimal Files, 1950-1954. Accessed on February 12, 2018. <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB78/propaganda%20058.pdf>
6. Often referred to by its Russian acronym IOKS (*Iranskoe obschestvo kul’turnoi svyazi s Sovetskim Soyuzom*).

7. State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), F. R-9518, op. 1, d. 502, 4; Avdeev, *Dom na Vesal-e Shirazi*, 53; Interview with Grant Voskanyan by the authors, October 2016.
8. Gheissari, *Iranian Intellectuals*, 71–3.
9. Pickett, “Soviet Civilization through a Persian Lens,” 816–17; from the 1950s onward, Soviet orientalists repeatedly studied the works of Sādegh Hedāyat (1903–51), whose views were in many ways compatible with Soviet ideology. See, for example: Keshelava, *Khudozhestvennaya proza Sadeka Khedayata*. The major contribution to the study of Hedāyat’s prose at the time came from the renowned Russian scholar of Iran and fellow at the Moscow Institute of Oriental Studies, Daniil Komissarov, who was a personal friend of Hedāyat’s: Komissarov, *Sadek Khedayat: zhizn’ i tvorchestvo*; Komissarov, *Sadek Khedayat: zhizn’ posle smerti*; “Obituary of Daniil Samuilovich Komissarov: ‘In Memoriam,’” *Vostok (Oriens)*, no. 5 (2008), 218.
10. On the propaganda and espionage work of VOKS regarding Germany, see Nevezhin, “Sovetskaya politika i kulturniye svyazi s Germaniyey”; on the activities of VOKS in Iran during and after World War II see Pickett, “Soviet Civilization through a Persian Lens.”
11. Different sources provide different founding dates for the Iran-America Society, ranging rather widely from the 1930s to the early 1950s. The Society began publishing its periodical in 1946 according to Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, 3. The University of Virginia library has issues from 1947 to 1948.
12. Interview with Gennady Avdeev by the authors, December 2017.
13. Interview with Voskanyan by the authors, December 2017.
14. GARF, F. R-9518, op. 1, d. 502, 4–9.
15. Avdeev, “Dom na Vesal-e Shirazi,” 53.
16. *Payām-e no*, Tehran, 2, no. 7, *hordād o tir*, 1320/1941 [?].
17. Interview with Avdeev by the authors, December 2017.
18. Interview with Voskanyan by the authors, October 2016.
19. Pickett, “Soviet Civilization through a Persian Lens,” 808.
20. Chaliand, *A People Without a Country*, 125.
21. Ansari, *Modern Iran Since 1921*, 93.
22. Gheissari, *Iranian Intellectuals*, 72–3.
23. National Archives, Document 96: Dispatch from US Embassy in Iran to the Department of State, May 29, 1953, 1–3.
24. Alvandi, “Flirting with Neutrality.”
25. Interview with Gennady Avdeev by the authors, December 2017.
26. Pickett, “Soviet Civilization through a Persian Lens,” 808.
27. The Russian word used here, *krysha*, meaning literally “roof,” is also used for individuals or organizations that provide unofficial protection against government organs or criminal groups.
28. The Fourth Head Directorate of the Ministry of Health of the USSR served top party members and offered the best medical care in the USSR.
29. Interview with Avdeev by the authors, November 2016. Jahānbāni had a sober sense of the difficulties posed by the two countries’ complex history. While many Soviet-Iranian interactions recorded in archives and periodicals have a stilted and overly official ring, the scholar Jahāngir Dorri has preserved a frank exchange involving Jahānbāni in Latvia: “In Riga, the delegation [led by Jahānbāni as head of the Cultural Society] was received by the Deputy Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of Latvia, whose surname I have forgotten. At the banquet in honor of the guests, his speech was more or less the following: Iran and the Soviet Union are neighbors. Throughout all of history there has always been friendship and mutual understanding between our two countries. And in all this time, between our two countries there have been neither wars nor conflicts. In response, the head of the Iranian delegation said, ‘Between Russia and Persia over the course of many centuries there have been almost continuous wars and countless conflicts. I cannot remember one decade when Persia did not attack Russia and plunder her cities and villages, or Russia did not devastate Iranian cities and make away with their treasures ... Let us hope that now, thanks to the wise policies of our countries’ leaders, relations between Iran and the Soviet

- Union will develop along neighborly and even friendly lines ... As far as relations between Iran and Latvia, well, as a matter of fact, between our two countries there have been neither wars nor conflicts. So I propose a toast to the friendship of our two countries.” Dorri, *Moi put’ v iranistiku*, 72-3.
30. GARF. F. R-9518, op. 1, d. 502, 2, 3.
 31. *Pravda*, September 2, 1952, 4.
 32. Interview with Voskanyan by the authors, October 2016.
 33. Kalinovskiy, “The Soviet Union and Mosaddeq,” 404; Mahdiyān, *Istoriya mezghosudarstvennykh otnoshenii Irana i Rossii*, 74.
 34. Interview with L. Bruce Laingen, who served as a US foreign service officer in Iran in 1953-55. The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project at the Library of Congress, 1992. <https://cdn.loc.gov/service/mss/mfdip/2004/2004lai01/2004lai01.pdf>
 35. GARF. F. R-9518, op. 1, d. 502, 1-224: Correspondence between the Soviet embassy in Iran, ministries and other Soviet organs and organizations responsible for cultural ties with Iran, June 27, 1957-December 25, 1964; GARF. F. R-9518, op. 1, d. 1081, 1-142: Transcripts of conversations with social and political figures about Iran and correspondence with the Soviet embassy in Iran and Soviet central organs responsible for cultural cooperation, January 3-December 18, 1967.
 36. *Izvestiya*, May 24, 1953, 3.
 37. The agreement was ratified in 1954: *Pravda*, April 26, 1955, 1; “easing political tensions”: *Izvestiya*, March 1, 1957, 3.
 38. Barghoorn, *The Soviet Cultural Offensive*, 180.
 39. Kirasirova, “‘Sons of Muslims’ in Moscow,” 116-17, 121.
 40. Abdul-Razak, “But What Would They Think Of Us?,” 822.
 41. *Ibid.*, 834, note 84; PRO, BW49/3, PER25/1; Shakespeare scholar and British Council representative in many countries Derek Traversi was posted to Iran in 1955-59. Obituary online at <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2005/sep/15/guardianobituaries.books>
 42. Borjiān, “The Rise and Fall,” 546-7; “British Council,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, IV/5, 455-6. <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/british-council-activities-in-iran-1942-79>; Torfeh and Sreberny, “BBC Persian Service”; Sreberny and Torfeh, *Persian Service*.
 43. Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, 14, 19.
 44. *Izvestiya*, September 17, 1950, 4.
 45. Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, 21-2.
 46. “If the Department is considering the production of films of more obvious propaganda type ... if this film were done in the style of Disney using his technique with the familiar Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, Pluto, and so forth, the reception would be further enhanced. The Embassy wonders if, in light of the increasing tempo of the cold war, Mr. Disney as a patriotic duty could be interested in preparing such a film that could be used to defend democracy where the communist system is being routed loudly. The Iranian people like clever satire and the Disney style is known and liked here”: United States Embassy in Tehran to the Department of State, “MOTION PICTURES—The Film TWO CITIES,” January 18, 1950, 1. National Archives. Record Group 59. Records of the Department of State. Decimal Files, 1950-54. <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu//NSAEBB/NSAEBB78/propaganda%20004.pdf>; the power of Mickey was so great that the British also wanted to use him: Abdul-Razak, “But What Would They Think Of Us?,” 821.
 47. Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, 20.
 48. Interview with Gennady Avdeev by the authors, December 2017.
 49. Report “On Fulfilling the Plans for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries in the Sphere of Artistic Exchanges Through GosConcert” prepared in January of 1963 by the State Committee on Cultural Ties with Foreign Countries under the Council of Ministers of the USSR and sent to the Minister of Culture of the USSR, Yekaterina Furtseva,” GARF, F. R-9518, op. 1, d. 22, 85.
 50. Barghoorn, *The Soviet Cultural Offensive*, 207.
 51. National Archives, Document 96: Dispatch from US Embassy in Iran to the Department of State, May 29, 1953, 4.
 52. A title of great distinction.

53. Also known as Pogos Lisitsian.
54. *Pravda*, January 10, 1957, 4.
55. The younger sister of Emil' Gilel's.
56. GARF. F. R-9518, op. 1, d. 502, 11-12. Later, official complaints were made about the failure to adequately publicize Soviet performances. See the report "On Fulfilling the Plans for Cultural Cooperation ...", GARF, F. R-9518, op. 1, d. 22, 90.
57. GARF. F. R-9518, op. 1, d. 502, 11-12.
58. *Ibid.*, 12-13; Kogan's son described the gift of gold watches and other details of the meeting in a conversation with the authors in October 2016.
59. GARF. F. R-9518, op. 1, d. 502, 13.
60. *Ibid.*, 12.
61. It is an indication of Kogan's enduring status that in 2014 in honor of his ninetieth birthday, a bust of him was placed in the foyer of the Great Hall of the Moscow Conservatory. (Zalyubovin, Igor, "Konservatoriya uvekovechila pamyat' vidayushhegosya skripacha Leonida Kogana" [The conservatory honors the memory of the outstanding violinist Leonid Kogan], *Moskva Vechernyaya*, December 12, 2014, 3.)
62. GARF. F. R-9518, op. 1, d. 502, 11.
63. Tomoff, *Virtuosi Abroad*, 12. Chapter 3 covers the conception of the Tchaikovsky Competition in detail.
64. Tomoff, *Virtuosi Abroad*, 92.
65. *Ibid.*, 91-2.
66. He migrated to the United States in the 1970s.
67. GARF. F. R-9518, op. 1, d. 502, 108.
68. *Ibid.*, 108.
69. *Ibid.*, 13.
70. *Ibid.*, 195.
71. *Ibid.*, 196.
72. Barghoorn, *The Soviet Cultural Offensive*, 13.
73. Feyzulayev, "Uchastiye Sovetskogo Azerbaydzhana," 177. The Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan played an especially important role in the cultural politics of the USSR in Iran. See Gasymlı, *Azerbaydzhān v mezhdunarodnykh kul'turnykh svyazyakh*; Gasanly, *SSSR-Iran*.
74. Interview with Voskanyan, October 2016.
75. *Ibid.* Behbudov had toured successfully in other eastern countries before coming to Iran, in particular India, where he performed songs in Urdu to audiences' delight (Barghoorn, *The Soviet Cultural Offensive*, 207).
76. GARF. F. R-9518, op. 1, d. 502, 108.
77. *Ibid.*, 108.
78. *Ibid.*, 159.
79. On Soviet and Russian Iranian studies, see Atkin, "Soviet and Russian Scholarship on Iran"; Kulagina, *Iranistika v Rossii i iranisty*.
80. The Institute of Eastern Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Sciences was founded in 2007 on the basis of the St. Petersburg branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, which from 1956 to 1991 had been the Leningrad branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR.
81. Sa'īd Nafisi, who from 1936 taught as a professor at the University of Tehran, was a well-known Iranian writer and author of works on philology and literary criticism who also published in the journal *Narody Azii i Afriki* [The peoples of Asia and Africa] (now named *Vostok (Oriens). Afro-Aziatskiye obshchestva: istoriya i sovremennost'*) (Nafisi, "Khafiz i Jahan Malik Khatun"). Beginning in the 1930s, he actively promoted Russian literature in Iran, became an organizer and member of the board of directors of the Cultural Society, and oversaw the Cultural Society journal *payām-e no* (Klyashtorina, "Rossiya–Iran," 43). In the Soviet Union, he was considered a "progressive writer." As a foreign guest, he participated in the Second All-Union Congress of Writers in

- December of 1954. In 1960, a Russian translation appeared of his novella *Nimeh rāh-e bebesht: Na polputi v ray* (Halfway to Paradise). Nafisi's work also became a popular subject of Soviet research and literary criticism (Giunashvili, *Khudozbestvennaya proza Saida Nafisi*; Giunashvili, *Poeziya Saida Nafisi*; Giunashvili, *Tvorcheskii put' Saida Nafisi*; Giunashvili, "Iranskiy demokrat-gumanist Said Nafisi"). For more detailed Soviet and Russian views of the writer, see Komissarov, "Nafisi"; Dorri, "Zapiski vostokoveda."
82. GARF. F. R-9518, op. 1, d. 502, 183.
 83. *Ibid.*, 183-4.
 84. Gvosdev, "Publishing and Book Distribution." On Soviet policy toward Iraq, see Mossaki, "Mezhbibliotechnoye sotrudnichestvo i knigoobmen."
 85. Whitby, "Soviet Libraries Today."
 86. In 1958, the Cultural Society was reformed as the Union of Soviet Friendship Associations. For more detail about the stages of development of this organization that "actively influenced the strengthening of friendship and cooperation" between the socialist republics and other countries, see Pankov and Saakov, "Mezhdunarodnoye dvizheniye"; Saakov, "Dvizheniye obshestvennosti."
 87. GARF. F. R-9518, op. 1, d. 502, 184.
 88. *Ibid.*, 185.
 89. Arabadzhyan, *Iran. Ocherki noveishei istorii*, 409-13; Blake, *The US-Soviet Confrontation in Iran*; Alvandi, "The Shah's Détente with Khrushchev."
 90. Gasymly, *Azerbaydzhan v mezhdunarodnykh kul'turnykh svyazyakh*, 226.
 91. Ivanova, "Solntse selo nizhe eli"; Afanasyev, "Stanovleniye sovetskogo vostokovedeniya," 139; Volkov, "Individuals, Institutions and Discourses."
 92. Aliyev, Rustam Musa Ogly (1929-94) graduated in 1951 with honors from Leningrad State University, defending his doctoral dissertation as a philologist at the same university in 1954 with "A Critical Text of Sa'di's *Gulistān*." From 1955 to 1971, he worked in the department of Eastern Textology at the Institute of Oriental Studies in Moscow, eventually heading the department. From 1971, he was director of the Arabic Manuscripts Department of the Azerbaijani Academy of Sciences, and from 1980, director of the Nizāmi Studies Department at the Nizāmi Institute of Literature.
 93. GARF. F. R-9518, op. 1, d. 502, 212.
 94. *Ibid.*, 205.
 95. Rudaki, *Stikhi* (1964); Ferdowsi, *Shah-name*, vol. I-II (1960, 1962). The subsequent volumes of the *Shah-name* were published after Aliyev left for Iran, thus bibliographical information on them is not included here. Aliyev compiled a report on his trip that provided information for this paper. Omar Khayyam, *Rubaiyat*, vol. 1-2 (1959); Omar Khayyam, *Traktaty* (1961); Sa'di, *Gulistan* (1959); Amir Khosrow Dehlavi, *Shirin i Khusrou* (1961).
 96. GARF. F. R-9518, op. 1, d. 502, 207.
 97. *Ibid.*, 208.
 98. *Ibid.*, 209.
 99. *Ibid.*, 210.
 100. *Ibid.*, 222.
 101. Gosudarstvennyi komitet po kul'turnym svyazyam s zarubezhnymi stranami (GKKC)
 102. GARF. F. R-9518, op. 1, d. 502, 210-11.
 103. *Ibid.*, 211.
 104. GARF. F. R-9518, op. 1, d. 22, 90.
 105. GARF. F. R-9518, op. 1, d. 502, 219.
 106. *Ibid.*, 213.
 107. *Ibid.*, 213.
 108. *Ibid.*, 214, 219.
 109. *Ibid.*, 221.
 110. *Ibid.*, 219, 221.
 111. *Ibid.*, 221.

112. An account of the trip of the Soviet delegation to the Worldwide Congress of Scholars of Iran was published in the journal *Narody Azii i Afriki* (Zand, "Pervyi Vsemirnyi kongress iranistov v Tegerane"). This article will address only those aspects of the Soviet delegation's participation not covered in that account.
113. GARF. F. R-9518. op. 1. d. 1081, 4, 6.
114. The largest number of congress participants came from the US—thirteen (including two Americans permanently living and working in Iran), twelve from West Germany, eleven from the United Kingdom, eleven from the USSR, seven from Turkey and six each from France and India. Representatives of several other socialist countries were also present at the congress.
115. GARF. F. R-9518. op. 1. d. 1081, 6.
116. *Ibid.*, 6.
117. Kemper, "Propaganda for the East," 173.
118. GARF. F. R-9518. op. 1. d. 1081, 10.
119. *Ibid.*, 11.
120. Kemper, "Propaganda for the East," 199.
121. GARF. F. R-9518. op. 1. d. 1081, 9.
122. *Ibid.*, 5, 11.
123. *Ibid.*, 11-12.
124. GARF. F. R-9518, op. 1, d. 1081, 15-18.
125. Rubinchik, "V filologicheskikh uchrezhdeniyakh Irana," 223.
126. Chehābi, "A Political History of Football in Iran."
127. Interview with Voskanyan by the authors, December 2017.
128. GARF. F. R-9518, op. 1, d. 502, 100-101.
129. *Pravda*, November 22, 1962, 8; *Pravda*, November 27, 1962, 4.
130. Zagrebel'ny, "Stanovleniye sovremennogo sporta v Irane."
131. 'Abbāsi, *History of Wrestling in Iran*, 484, 493.
132. *Tehran Times*, January 8, 2012. <https://web.archive.org/web/20120626091618/http://tehrantimes.com/sports/94301-iranians-honor-wrestling-legend-gholam-reza-takhti->
133. *Ibid.* But this version of Takhti's loss is well known. Troinikov, "Titany bor'by XX-go Veka."
134. Troinikov, "Titany bor'by XX-go Veka."
135. *Ibid.*; Interview with Avdeev by the authors, December 2017.
136. <http://www.irna.ir/ru/News/3426424>
137. Kalinovsky, "The Soviet Union and Mosaddeq," 407-8.
138. Barghoorn, "Soviet Cultural Effort," 157, 158.
139. Interview with Phillip W. Pillsbury Jr., who served as the director of the Iran-America Society in Iran in 1972-74. The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project at the Library of Congress, 1994, 35. <http://www.adst.org/OH%20TOCs/Pillsbury,%20Phillip.toc.pdf>
140. Interview with Avdeev by the authors, November 2016.
141. *Ibid.*
142. Mamedova, "Istoriya sovetsko-iranskikh otnoshenii," 167.
143. Dorri, *Moi put' v iranistiku*, 92.

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