

# 1946

The Making of the Modern World

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PAN BOOKS

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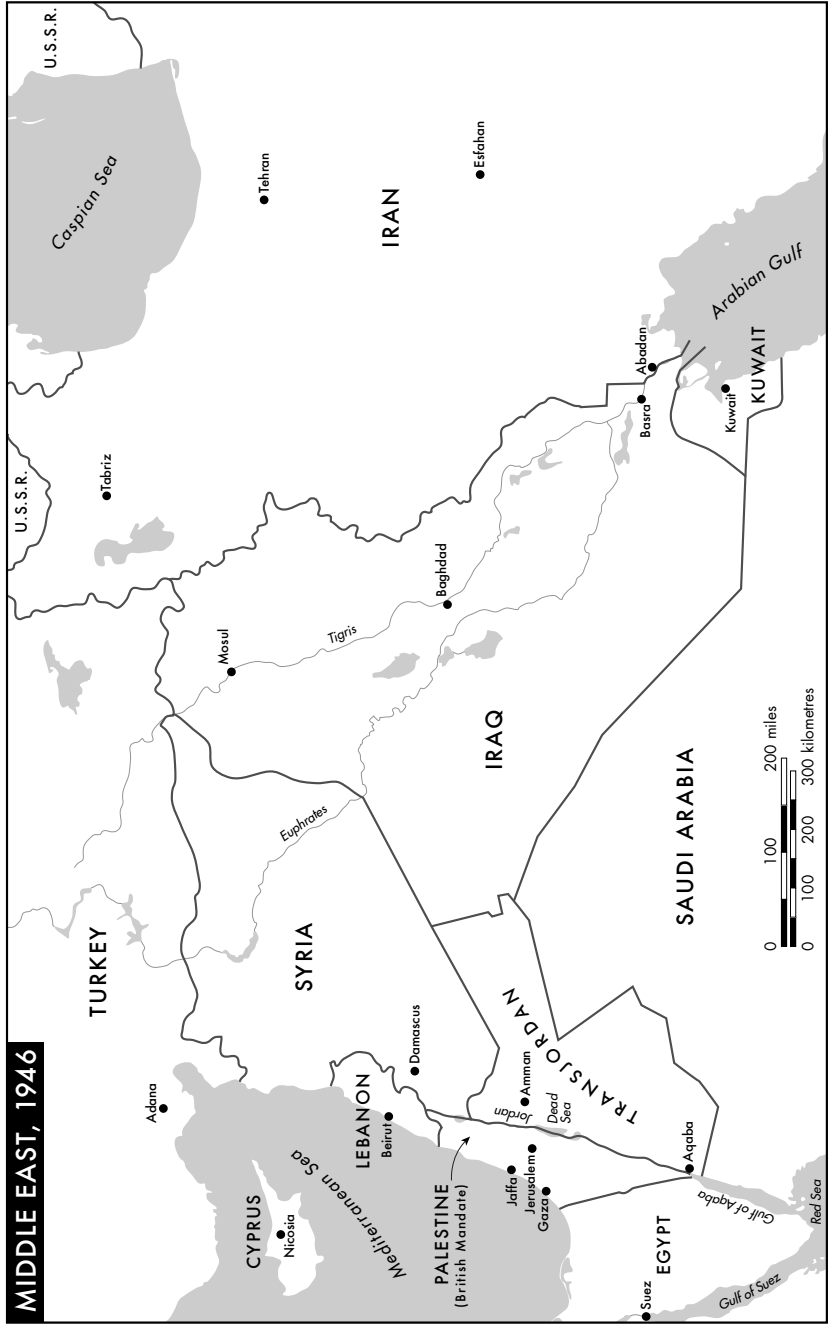
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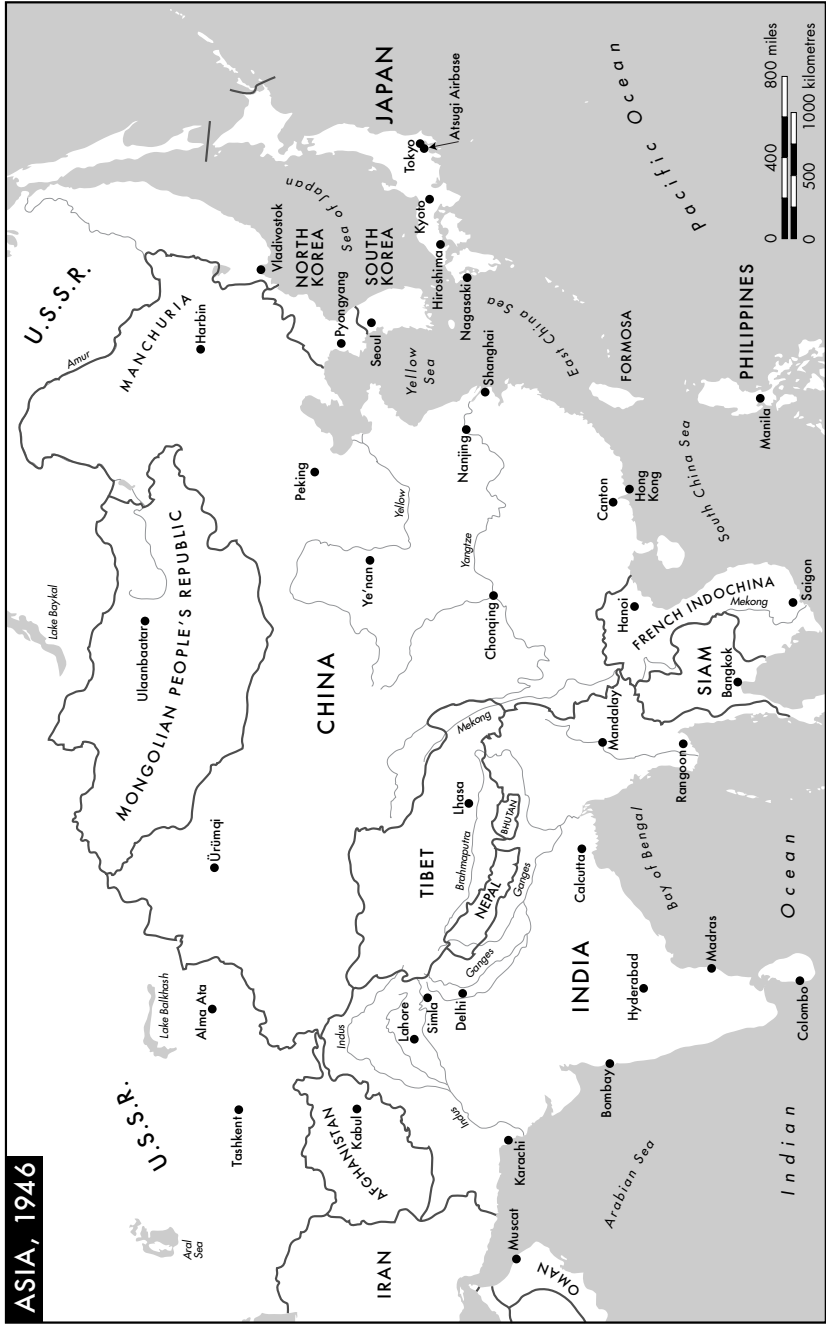




**MIDDLE EAST, 1946**



# ASIA, 1946



## *Introduction*

As a journalist, I have covered events ranging from the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the former Soviet Union to the cycle of violence and counter-violence in the Middle East over the existence of Israel and Palestine. Throughout, America has dominated as the world's superpower. During many visits to India I have seen a desperately poor country, stuck in the past, transform itself into a vibrant society, looking to the future. China moved from permanent revolution to a form of rampant capitalism run by people calling themselves communists. When, as an historian, I tried to trace the roots of all these events and stories I returned continually to one reference point: 1946. The immediate post-war year laid the foundations of the modern world. The Cold War began, the world split on ideological lines, and Europe began to divide physically on two sides of an Iron Curtain. Israel would not come into being for two years, but 1946 was the year the decisions were made to create a Jewish homeland, with consequences that have remained so fateful since. It was the year independent India was born as the world's most populous democracy, and old Britain as a great imperial power began to die. All the European empires were dying, though imperialism has lived on in various forms. It was the year the Chinese communists launched their final push for victory in a civil war that led to the re-emergence of China as a great power. This story aims to show how decisions taken in 1946 – and the men and women who took them – shape our world now.

There was little optimism in 1946, anywhere. At the start of

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the year a senior American official who had just returned from a visit to Europe went to the White House and reported to President Harry Truman in apocalyptic terms: 'The very foundations, the whole fabric of world organization which we have known in our lifetime and which our fathers and grandfathers knew' was threatened, he said. He was not exaggerating. As so often, Winston Churchill found the most eloquent words and expressed the feelings of millions. In September 1946 he described the continuing aftermath of World War Two: 'What is the plight to which Europe has been reduced? Over wide areas, a vast quivering mass of tormented, hungry, careworn and bewildered human beings gape at the ruins of their cities and homes and scan the dark horizons for the approach of some new peril, tyranny or terror. Among the "victors", there is a Babel of jarring voices. Among the vanquished, a sullen silence of despair.'<sup>1</sup>

Churchill was speaking of Europe, but he could also have been talking about large tracts of Asia. He feared, as many rational people did, the arrival of 'a new dark age – with all its cruelty and squalor'. In no other war had so many people been killed in such a short space of time – around sixty million in six years. Now the World War had stopped, but the dying had not. The moment of 'liberation' the previous year had been exhilarating, but soon the reality emerged. Civil wars would continue for the next four years in China and Greece. There were rebellions against the Soviets in Ukraine, where nationalists also fought Poles in a brutal conflict that cost more than fifty thousand lives, and wars of independence flared up in various parts of Asia. Despite the Holocaust, after the war outbreaks of anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe, hard to explain to a modern reader, claimed the lives of around fifteen hundred Jews who had somehow managed to escape the Nazis.

In much of Europe there were no schools, virtually no transport links, no libraries, no shops – there was nothing to sell or buy – and almost nothing was manufactured any longer. There were virtually no banks, which didn't matter all that much as money

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was worthless. There was no law and order; men and children roamed the streets with weapons, either to protect what they possessed or to threaten the possessions of others. Women of all ages and backgrounds prostituted themselves for food and protection. Morality and traditional ideas of ownership had changed utterly; now the imperative was usually survival. This was how millions of Europeans lived in 1946.

Berlin and Hiroshima provided the most powerful images of the war: in both cities around three-quarters of the buildings had been destroyed by Allied bombing. But from the Seine to the Danube delta the heartland of Europe had been ravaged. In China, the Japanese, before their defeat, blew up all the dykes along the Yellow River, flooding three million acres of good farmland that took three decades to recover and caused enduring hunger for millions.

There was mass starvation and economic collapse. In the Eastern half of Germany, Ukraine and Moldova, around three million people died from hunger in the eighteen months after the war. In the Polish town of Lwów, the story that a mother driven mad with hunger killed and ate her two children barely made the newspapers. In Hungary inflation reached an unenviable world record of 14 quadrillion per cent (that's 15 noughts). Worthless currencies throughout Europe were replaced by bartering in cigarettes or scrounging from foreign armies. The northern hemisphere was swamped with refugees, particularly in Central Europe where prisoners of war, forced labourers and emaciated survivors of Nazi concentration camps were all grouped by the victorious Allies as 'displaced persons'.

After the First World War, borders were shifted and new countries were invented, but people were left in place. In 1946 the opposite happened. The Red Army's sweep to victory was accompanied by a massive programme of ethnic cleansing as nearly 12 million Germans were expelled westwards. Two and a half million people in Western Europe were forced to return back east to the

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tender mercies of Stalin and his henchmen, mostly against their will, and some at gunpoint by the troops from the Western Allies.

This book takes a global view; the whole world was transformed after the Second World War, more profoundly, it can be argued, than after the First. That war destroyed empires which had lasted for centuries – the Ottoman, the Romanov and the Habsburg. From 1945 the remaining old European empires, such as the British, were no longer sustainable, despite some doomed efforts by fading powers to cling on to former glories. Imperialism was no longer dynastic but ideological – loyalty was demanded less to a king or emperor than to an idea, say Marxism–Leninism. Some readers may be surprised that much of the story I tell here is centred on Europe. But that is where the Cold War, the clash of civilisations which continued for the following four decades, was sharpest, at least when it began. What happened in Germany and Eastern Europe, Britain and France, in 1946 was considered by the major players at the time to be of the utmost importance. If there were to be a new armed conflict – and in 1946 it very much looked as though there might be – the battleground was likely once again to be in the heartland of Europe. It seemed to me sensible, therefore, to centre the book in Europe, at the same time showing how events in 1946 were dramatically shaping the future of Asia and the Middle East.

One country emerged from the war much stronger. Alone among the chief protagonists in the conflict, mainland America was physically untouched. The overwhelming dominance of the US as the world's economic, financial and military powerhouse dates from 1946. The war lifted America out of Depression. The contrast between America's new wealth and the poverty of its enemies and allies was of profound importance in the aftermath of the war.

In much of Asia 'liberation' is not exactly the right word for events following the surrender of Japan. The European empires attempted to reassert their dominion over their old colonies: the

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French in Indo-china, the Dutch in the East Indies, the British in Malaya and Singapore, but they couldn't sustain traditional-style colonial rule for long. The agony of withdrawal was worse and more bloody for some than others – humiliatingly for France in Vietnam for example. In the sub-continent, the British were desperate to leave as soon as they could; with indecent haste according to many critics, who argue that the British 'scuttled' and caused the violence that accompanied the partition of India and Pakistan. It seems to me imperial folly to imagine that the British could have prevented the massacres, short of despatching hundreds of thousands of troops. Almost the only thing the Hindus and Muslims in India agreed on was that the British were the problem, not the solution.

Arthur Schlesinger Jr., the historian and one-time aide to President Kennedy, described peace-making after the war as 'not so much a tapestry as . . . a hopelessly raveled and knotted mess of yarn'. A war that had been fought to prevent Germany dominating and despoiling Europe ended with the danger that the USSR would take Germany's place. For the last quarter of a century the conventional view among politicians and historians has been that the West 'sold out' Central and Eastern Europe to the Soviets, a deed done principally by US President Franklin D. Roosevelt, with a helping hand from Churchill, at the Yalta Conference in February 1945. The argument has gone that Roosevelt, who had just a few weeks to live, was too ill and weak to stand up to Stalin, and the West had naïvely given away Eastern Europe for nothing in a settlement that amounted to 'appeasement' of communism. This has become orthodoxy, even though the narrative was formed before Soviet archives began to open after 1991, revealing how determined the Soviets were to keep what they had already gained by force of arms.

Eastern Europe was not America's or Britain's to 'give away'. Soviet troops had already gained possession of most of the region. There was nothing the West could have done about it at the time

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of Yalta, which took place before the defeat of Germany, or afterwards. At Yalta, five months before the atom bomb was even tested, the Americans believed that they would need the Soviets' help to invade Japan.

Far from being naïve, the Western Allies were cynical. They kept the Russians fighting and dying on the Eastern Front so that fewer American and British soldiers would be killed when, eventually, D-Day came. The longer Roosevelt and Churchill delayed invading France, the more territory the Soviets would gain in the East. It was a straightforward and deliberate calculation: more dead Russians meant fewer dead Americans and British. Who is to say they were wrong? In 1946, and for years afterwards, the general feeling among politicians and historians was that Western leaders were being realistic and practical. The post-war settlement was the best they were likely to achieve and a price worth paying to defeat Hitler. Critics of the Western Allies have never been able to show how they could have got a better deal, what they would have done to prevent Soviet domination of Eastern Europe.

\*

A word on geography and terminology. Throughout this narrative (as above) I have used the terms Central Europe and Eastern Europe interchangeably and I realise this is a liberty. I do not wish to tread on toes. Entire books have been written about the 'meaning' of Central Europe as an idea, where it ends and Eastern Europe begins. I intend them to mean the same thing, purely to avoid repetition as far as I can. Similarly with the Soviet Union, the USSR and Russia. Obviously I know that 'Russian' is not the same as 'Soviet'. I use them loosely solely in the interests of style.

I have written here a great deal about the Cold War, which began within months of the end of the most destructive shooting war in history. Along with the fear of hunger and disease, the biggest terror for most people in 1946 was of renewed global warfare, this time between the Allies that had defeated Germany.



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There was nothing inevitable about the Cold War, though the differences between the West and a dictatorship controlled by a man such as Stalin were so great that enduring trust and cooperation were never a serious possibility. As I show, the leaders and their people stumbled through misunderstandings and, occasionally, deliberate policy into a conflict of ideas, clashing interests and aspirations that had terrible consequences for millions of people over two generations – including, in a minor way, for myself, a refugee from tyranny behind the Iron Curtain. This has been more than a story for me. It has been part of a search for my roots.

**Victor Sebestyen**

*London, February 2014*



# 1

## ‘I’m Tired of Babying the Soviets’

**The coup had been** almost bloodless. On 15 December 1945, from his capital, Tabriz in north-west Iran, the new Prime Minister of the People’s Government of Azerbaijan had just announced his first proclamation to a bemused people. Henceforth, he declared, his fledgling nation would cease to be a province of Iran, ruled by a distant and ‘alien’ shah in Tehran. It would become an autonomous republic. Rather than Farsi, the Turkic dialect spoken by most Azeris would now be the official state language. A new constitution would guarantee freedoms long suppressed by Iran’s autocratic rulers. The banks would be nationalised. There would be ‘a job for everybody who wants one’. Peasants would be given land expropriated from big absentee landlords in a far-reaching socialist revolution.<sup>1</sup>

Ja’far Pishevari was an unlikely nationalist firebrand or communist dictator. A stocky fifty-two-year-old, he was a man of good humour, invariably with a broad smile on his face. He had been a journalist most of his life, and a low-level Comintern agent, apart from the nine years he had spent in an Iranian prison for ‘subversion’. Much of his family had lived in the USSR for years; one of his brothers was a doctor in the Red Army. He had been relatively unknown until the start of the previous year, except as the author of a few fiery articles promoting Azeri nationalism. His story became a brief cause célèbre among the left/liberal intelligentsia in Tehran when he won election to the Iranian Parliament, the Majlis, but was barred from taking his seat by the Shah’s government. He

returned to obscurity, then to his own amazement, let alone that of anyone else, he was handpicked by Joseph Stalin, the Soviet leader in the Kremlin, to be front man for the new order in a strategic part of central Asia, bordering the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan.

In Marco Polo's time Tabriz had been one of the largest cities in the world, the principal gateway to the Orient – 'a great city of beautiful gardens . . . exceptionally positioned for merchants,' as the Venetian traveller described it. After Tamerlane sacked it in 1392, history and other potential conquerors passed by Tabriz for several hundred years. In the middle of the twentieth century it was a dusty, sleepy town of some 110,000 mostly poor artisans, traders and subsistence farmers. The gardens were long gone. A few grand buildings stood amidst the mud huts and general squalor. Now this backwater was centre stage again. If the Cold War can be said to have started anywhere, Tabriz is the place. Over the next few weeks, only a few people at the highest levels in Washington, London and Moscow knew how very close the world came to the start of a new shooting war.

Pishevari established himself in the biggest and grandest of the remaining buildings – an enormous, if ugly, palace that had once belonged to an Iranian provincial governor. He held court in a vast reception room decorated in gilded eighteenth-century French style. Soviet troops stood guard outside the door. 'He looked deceptively unlike a ruthless communist gauleiter,' a visitor recorded. 'He stood about five feet five inches, had steely grey hair and a small brush moustache under a sharp hook nose . . . [he wore] a shiny blue serge suit and a collared shirt frayed at the cuffs and noticeably soiled at the collar, which was buttoned but tieless. His hands were the rough hands of the peasant and the fingernails were dirty.'<sup>2</sup>

Western diplomats agreed that the real power in the new state belonged to the diminutive, smartly dressed Mohammed Biriya, a sinister figure in his mid-forties who had done much to foment revolution as head of the Society of Friends of the USSR. Formerly,

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Biriya had been a talented professional flautist and leader of the Tabriz street cleaners’ union. Officially, his title was Minister of Propaganda but, more importantly, he ran the secret police, whose members were trained by Russian advisors from the NKVD. They had been arresting opponents for the last few days, roughing up well-known anti-communists and other potential opponents.

Three days earlier, members of Pishevari’s ragbag People’s Army had taken over the police stations in Tabriz and the surrounding area, the central post office and the radio station, the classic revolutionary targets, and blocked all principal roads into the city. But the coup could not have succeeded without help from outside. There were between thirty and fifty thousand Soviet troops in or near Tabriz. Without firing a shot, one Russian detachment surrounded the Iranian army headquarters on the outskirts of the city and disarmed the garrison. The central government in Tehran despatched a small relief column, but it was halted on the main road between the two cities when confronted by a far stronger Soviet force as it reached the border of the ‘rebel’ province. The commander turned his soldiers back.

The Soviets claimed they were aiding freedom-loving Azeris, many of whom had family connections in the USSR, and had intervened ‘to avoid unnecessary bloodshed.’ But it was a lie. Amidst the strictest secrecy in order to maintain plausible deniability, the Russians had begun planning the takeover in the summer of 1945. The proof emerged only five decades later, after the USSR fell apart. Officials from Baku, capital of the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan, and in Moscow, organised the coup meticulously and financed it. Stalin personally gave the go-ahead and later was made aware of every significant detail. The Soviet spy chief, Lavrenti Beria, was in nominal charge of the operation from Moscow, but the nuts and bolts would be the responsibility of the local Communist Party boss in Baku, Mir Bagirov.

The strategy had been decided in Moscow on 6 July, at a

meeting of senior Soviet magnates who authorised Bagirov to 'organise a separatist movement . . . which would agitate for an autonomous Azerbaijani province'. It named Pishevari as leader of the new organisation, which Kremlin officials insisted should be called the Azerbaijan Democratic Party, the ADP, in a crude and pointless effort to make it look different from the Communist Party, the Tudeh. Funds were provided, reasonably generous sums given the dire condition of the post-war Soviet economy. The ADP launched a newspaper that avoided socialist agitprop but was designed to fuel ethnic tensions.<sup>3</sup>

The ADP was supplied with weapons to arm a partisan group of around 3,000 fighters, which would later form the core of a People's Army. But Kremlin officials insisted that 'the equipment must be of foreign make' to hide its origins. Pishevari was given a million US dollars in convertible currency, a large sum for Moscow at the time. By the end of November, the ADP proudly reported to the Kremlin that it had assembled thirty units of a hundred men each, supplied with 11,000 rifles, 1,000 pistols, 400 machine guns, 2,000 grenades and more than a million rounds of ammunition 'ready to fight whoever stood in the way of . . . autonomy for Azerbaijan.'<sup>4</sup>

The takeover mystified Iranian Azeris, most of whom were unconcerned with nationalism. Poverty, the rapacity of absentee landlords, and the scarcity of water were more pressing concerns, as Moscow was told by its own agents and military on the ground. Iranian rulers, including the former Shah, had periodically tried to ban the Turkic language, which was deeply resented. But the laws were invariably disobeyed. Over the centuries the various ethnic groups in Iran had rubbed along together reasonably well. There had been no serious bloodshed for centuries. The Russians, though, were feared by all the region's ethnic groups, not only the Azeris. True, the rulers in Tehran were distant and cared little for Azeri feelings, but at least they were fellow Muslims. Apart from a small number of communists and ultra-nationalists in Tabriz,

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few people felt kinship with the Azeris across the border in the USSR, who had to endure life under the godless and sinful Soviets.

Biriya, in particular, knew he and the Soviets faced an uphill struggle to win over hearts and minds for the ADP. Soon after the coup he resorted to traditional methods of persuasion. Tribal leaders and prominent figures brave enough to voice opposition were jailed and a few were murdered. Dissent was quickly silenced.

One of the few Western observers who had seen the takeover coming was John Wall, the British Consul in Tabriz. Wall had been monitoring troop movements and café talk in the bazaar and wrote a series of warning telegrams to London, to which he seldom received a response – until the coup. Now he was pessimistic for the future. He saw how his Soviet equivalent behaved more like a commissar in one of the Baltic states than a diplomat in a foreign country. ‘The Russians are more determined than ever to maintain their hold on the province,’ he reported in mid-December. ‘There is no railway to Tehran, but there is to Baku and that is where “autonomous” Azerbaijan is heading . . . [it] feels more like a part of Russia than of Iran.’<sup>25</sup>

\*

Stalin did not care in the slightest about the national aspirations of the Azeris. He loathed what he regarded as petty chauvinism. In the Soviet republics, when he thought any of his own subjects wanted autonomy, his first instinct was to react with brutal repression. Typically, his way of dealing with the ‘national question’ was to uproot entire ethnic groups and transport them thousands of miles from their homeland to unfamiliar territory as a way of teaching them a lesson about nationhood. This is what he did to the Kazakhs, Kalmyks, Chechens, Tatars and many others, murdering millions along the way. But he was willing to use nationalism and to play ethnic politics when it suited him.

Stalin’s objective in Iran was never to annex a new territory and impose a Soviet system there, as he was to do in Eastern

Europe. His principal aim in the region was simpler and more modest: he wanted an oil concession in southern Azerbaijan. His allies, Britain and the US, would end the Second World War possessing drilling rights in what was by far the world's biggest oil-producing nation, and he saw that unless he staked a claim now, the Soviet Union would not. So he was willing to bully the Iranians, and risk the wrath of the Western powers, in a bid to get them. It was the world's first oil crisis.

For much of the Second World War, Iran had been occupied by the Soviets and the British. All the Allies considered Iran vital to their effort against Nazi Germany. After the Germans invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941 and the Big Three alliance was formed against Hitler, most of the supplies the Soviets needed were shipped by the United States to the Persian Gulf. It was the obvious supply route, and the lifeline without which the USSR might not have survived, as even Stalin grudgingly admitted. It started with a trickle, but when America entered the war after Pearl Harbor, weapons, ammunition, machine tools, war materiel on a vast scale, as well as food, were sent to southern Iran. From there it went by road to the Soviet Union, which shares a 1,700 km border with Iran.

An initial problem for the Allies was that Iran had been neutral in the conflict with Germany. Its ruler, Shah Reza Pahlavi, and most of the clique of soldiers and aristocrats around him had strong pro-Nazi sympathies. During the 1930s Iran had developed close trading ties with Germany and there were hundreds of German businessmen, political advisors and spies in Tehran. In August 1941 Britain and Russia jointly exerted pressure on the Shah to expel the Germans, knowing he would be reluctant to comply. As the British Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, was told by officials from the India Office, "The greatest benefit would be drawn from the elimination of the Shah."<sup>6</sup>

Russian troops entered Iran from the north and a British force invaded from the south. The Iranian army put up token



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resistance. On 16 September the Shah abdicated in favour of his inexperienced twenty-one-year-old son, Mohammed Reza, who until then had been excluded by his father from politics or any kind of public life. One of the new Shah’s first acts was to expel all Germans. The Iranians may not have been unhappy to see the back of their corrupt, despotic and dissolute ruler, who himself had seized power seventeen years earlier in a military coup, and whose opponents often tended to ‘disappear’. But the manner of his going was widely seen in Iran as insulting and the foreign interference was deeply resented, especially by the urban middle class.\*

Within weeks seventy thousand Soviet troops occupied northern and western Iran, guarding the supply routes and using Tabriz as their base. About fifty thousand British soldiers controlled the south of the country, the crucial Gulf ports and the area around Tehran. The Tripartite Agreement signed by the Shah gave the occupying armies sweeping powers over Iran’s security, defence and internal politics, but only for the duration of the conflict. The agreement stated that the Occupation forces would withdraw within six months of the end of the war. After VE Day, the Iranians took back political authority of the country and wanted to see the swift departure of foreign troops.

The British began winding down their garrison soon after the defeat of Japan three months later, but the Russians remained in force. On the whole, during the war the Occupation forces had got on well. Despatches from the British Ambassador in Tehran, Sir Reader Bullard, for example, praised the efforts of the Soviets to help feed the population in their zone when there was a local food shortage. But after the war distrust quickly surfaced. It seemed as though the nineteenth-century Great Game was being

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\* Reza Pahlavi was taken prisoner by British troops and kept under house arrest, initially in Mauritius and then in Johannesburg. He died in July 1944 in South Africa from a heart attack, aged sixty-six. His son remained on the throne until he was overthrown in the Islamic Revolution of 1979 led by the Ayatollah Khomeini. He died in 1980.

replayed, with Britain and Russia again vying for influence in Central Asia. However, one important new factor altered this Kiplingesque picture: for the first time the United States became a significant presence in Iran, and elsewhere in the Middle East.

Before the war America had virtually no trading ties with Iran, and only low-level diplomatic relations. Even those were placed in jeopardy in 1936 when the Iranians withdrew their ambassador for nearly a year during a dispute following the appearance of an article in the *New York Daily Herald* that called Reza Shah ill-mannered and likened him to 'a stable boy'. Otherwise, Iran was barely noticed by analysts in the State Department. Yet by 1943 President Franklin Roosevelt had declared that Iran's security and prosperity were vital to the future strategic needs of the US. At the end of 1944 there were more than five thousand Americans in Iran – technicians, engineers, economists, political officers, and spies. Some were managing the Lend Lease programme of aid to the USSR; others were effectively in charge of the Iranian finance department and public health service. As Wallace Murray, head of the State Department's Near East division boasted, the US 'would soon be in a position of actually running Iran, through an impressive body of American advisors.'<sup>7</sup>

US influence in Iran depressed British officials of the old school, who rightly saw it as a sign of waning British prestige. Bullard sent a series of splenetic telegrams complaining about the vulgarity and 'showiness' of the pushy Americans who did not know how to behave 'in front of Persian grandees'. But it deeply disturbed the Soviets, and Stalin in particular, who now recognised the Americans as a powerful new rival in areas where Russia had historically claimed an interest.

Stalin could see that when the war came to an end the Soviets would have occupied parts of Iran for several years but, as he complained to other magnates in the Kremlin, they might have to withdraw without getting anything out of the country. That, he declared, was unacceptable. Iran produced more oil than the rest

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of the Middle East put together. For thirty years the British had possessed sole drilling rights through the Anglo-Iranian Oil company, which operated the biggest refinery in the world at Abadan. Soviet intelligence knew that in September 1943 two US companies, Standard Oil of New Jersey and Sinclair Oil, began secret negotiations with the Iranian Government for an American oil concession in southern Iran.

More worryingly, according to Beria’s spies, the other Allies were trying to block the Soviets from acquiring drilling rights in the north. ‘The British, and possibly the Americans, secretly work against a transfer to us of oil fields,’ he reported to the Soviet Politburo in the summer of 1944.<sup>8</sup>

In September Stalin despatched one of his favourites, a deputy Foreign Minister named Sergei Kavtaradze, to Tehran to negotiate for oil. The talks did not go well. According to a Russian transcript of his interview with the Shah, the Soviet official began by complaining that ‘we are not satisfied with the present state of relations between our two countries’. Then he demanded ‘as our right’ a licence, with immediate effect, permitting the USSR to explore for oil in Iranian Azerbaijan for five years. He was turned down and told that no decisions would be made about oil concessions until after the war was over. Kavtaradze was indignant and accused Iran of ‘pursuing a one-sided policy that discriminated against the Soviet Union.’ Later, he told the Iranian Prime Minister that the decision would have ‘unhappy consequences . . . you are disloyal and unfriendly to the Soviet Union.’ It is unlikely, however, that if he had behaved with more finesse Kavtaradze would have fared any better. The Iranians were determined to refuse the Soviets a permanent toehold in their country.<sup>9</sup>

Stalin was unsurprised that his emissary returned home empty handed. But he did nothing hasty to pursue his goal of an oilfield on the USSR’s southern frontier, which he thought would also give him a secondary prize of acting as a buffer zone to secure that border. At this stage, winning the war and keeping on good terms

with the Western Allies were far higher priorities. But within weeks of the German surrender the Soviets renewed their efforts. Kavtaradze was sent to negotiate in Tehran once more and was again turned down. Now the Iranian government said that the Majlis would decide, after new elections and when foreign troops had left Iranian soil. It was this that prompted the Soviets to use the threat of a separatist revolt in Azerbaijan to exert more pressure on Iran, with the hapless Ja'far Pishevari as their tool.

The Soviet leadership in Moscow decided on the timing of the coup in Tabriz. It went ahead when Stalin thought the Iranians had played for time long enough. He calculated that now the war was over he had little to lose, though he turned out to be badly mistaken. The Western Allies became convinced that Russia's interference in Iran was the prelude to a full-scale invasion of the Middle East and Turkey, though there was little solid evidence.

The day after Pishevari made his 'autonomy' declaration, Iran appealed to Britain and the US for help. A local dispute principally about oil was thus turned into a potentially dangerous international incident, setting a pattern of cold war crises for years to come. The world would grow familiar with the mistrust and misunderstandings of the 'superpowers' (though that term had not yet been coined), the poor intelligence sources on both sides, the highly inflated rhetoric, the fear of showing weakness. The Americans demanded that the Soviets cease backing the rebellious break-away movement and allow the Iranian government to reassert its authority in Tabriz. The Soviets said their actions were necessary to restore order and to protect the Red Army garrison there.

The wrangle over Iran nearly torpedoed the Moscow Foreign Ministers' Conference, which began the week before Christmas 1945. The meeting was supposed to settle outstanding issues like the peace treaties in Korea and Italy, the composition of new governments in Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria and the establishment of a peace commission for China. But Iran overshadowed proceedings, especially when Stalin announced that Russia no longer

## ‘I’m Tired of Babying the Soviets’

intended to honour an agreement made at the Potsdam Conference of the Big Three in July to withdraw its troops from Iran by 2 March the following year. He said he feared ‘subversion and sabotage in Baku’, though that was deception. All sides agreed to meet again in the New Year to discuss the Iran question, but instead they had reached a stand-off.<sup>10</sup>

One man made no attempt to hide his anger and frustration. US President Harry Truman had spent the eight months since he moved into the White House trying to work out how to deal with the Soviets. As he acknowledged, he had been inconsistent, even contradictory, which had got him to the point, as he told one of his chief aides soon after Christmas, ‘when we might any day be at war with Russia over Iran’. Now he made up his mind to follow a clear policy. At the beginning of January 1946 he wrote to his Secretary of State, James Byrnes:

The Russians have been a headache ever since Potsdam. The presence now of Russian troops in Iran and the fact that Russia stirs up rebellion there . . . is an outrage if ever I saw one. There isn’t a doubt . . . that Russia intends an invasion of Turkey and the seizure of the Black Sea straits to the Mediterranean . . . Unless Russia is faced with an iron fist and strong language, another war is in the making. The only language they understand is ‘how many divisions do you have?’ I do not think we should play compromise any longer . . . I am tired of babying the Soviets.

It had taken less than six months for wartime partners in the most destructive conflict in history to become enemies – as they were to remain for the next four decades.<sup>11</sup>