From Neutrality to Its Infringement: Holomine in Persia during World War I

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/zeiny/20/
The outbreak of World War One and its consequences represents one of the most momentous political episodes in twentieth-century world history. One of the largely unknown calamities of World War One is that several non-European countries such as Persia suffered a great deal because of the War. Although Persia declared neutrality when the war broke out, it became the battleground for the Ottoman, the Russians and the British. Immersed in its own civil war, Persia then had to witness the battle between Russia-Britain with the German supported Ottomans. This, along with some other factors, such as natural factors and the incompetency of the central government, caused great famine in Persia in the last two years of the war killing 9 million people. However, as one of the greatest tragedies of the 20th century, termed here as ‘Holomine’, this calamity is largely unknown or forgotten. By studying the history of Persia before and during the Great War, this chapter examines the reasons for violation of Persia’s neutrality. The chapter discusses factors which contributed to the spread of famine throughout Persia and explains how ca. 40% of the Persians expired.

Introduction

In the annals of world history, few incidents have had a more profound effect than that of World War One (1914-1918). The outbreak of World War One, and its consequences, represents one of the most momentous political episodes in twentieth-century world history. World War One had a dramatic impact, not only upon the history of Europe, but also upon the history and development of many non-European nations, such as Iran. It is one of the little-known calamities of World War One that non-European countries such as Persia suffered a great deal because of the war. In fact, the principal approach to historiography regarding this period is that of Eurocentrism which solely focuses on the war in Europe, overlooking the Great War’s influence on many non-European countries. One of the largely unknown calamities of World War One is that Persia, a country not directly involved in the war, was no less affected by the conflict.¹ In his 1934 biography of Lord Curzon, the British Foreign Secretary, Nicolson wrote: ‘Persia, during the [Great] War, had been exposed to violations and sufferings not endured by any other neutral

country.\(^2\) It witnessed a sharp decrease in its population – approximately 40% of its population died because of war-caused famine, and the maladies that are associated with malnutrition. Even those countries directly involved in the Great War did not suffer equivalent damage and casualties in either absolute or relative terms. Although Persia declared neutrality when the war broke out, it became a battleground for the Ottoman, Russian, and British armies. Already immersed in its own civil war, Persia then had to witness the battle between Russia-Britain and the German-supported Ottomans which caused the Great Famine in Persia in the last two years of the war, and killed 9 million people. Yet, as one of the greatest tragedies of the 20\(^{th}\) century, termed here as a ‘Holomine’, this calamity is often unknown or forgotten.

A Holomine is a compound of the prefix ‘Holo’ which means whole or entire, and the last four letters of ‘famine’ which can figuratively refer to the military mine (the device used for exploding and eradicating) in this context. It is termed ‘Holomine’ here because the famine both practically affected and spread across the whole country, and as this was wartime, the famine became a figurative mine in killing people. In this sense, the Holomine or the Great Famine can be compared with the Holodomor, the hunger-extermiation referring to the genocide of the Ukrainian people carried out in the Soviet Union by the Stalinist regime through the man-made famine in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1932 and 1933. While acknowledging that Holodomor and the Holomine are very different terms, it is contended here that they can be associated and compared in terms of loss of life and the depth of the calamity. Being a man-made genocide, the Holodomor occurred because of some deliberate actions by the Stalinist regime (such as repudiation of aid coming from outside and seizure of all household foodstuffs) in the area already affected by problems resulting from the economic changes implemented in the Soviet Union (collectivization of the agriculture and extensive industrialization), leading to the death of an estimated 7 million Ukrainians.\(^3\) This worsened with another 6.5 million dying because of the so called dekulakization\(^4\), increasing the total number of deaths to 13.5 million.\(^5\)


\(^4\) This was the expropriation of the properties of kulak households (to be used to fund the new collective farms) and their deportations and executions (1929-1932).

What was distinct in the Persia’s Great Famine or Holomine was the fact that the British created a hopeless condition through storing all the available food for their soldiers, and preventing the import of food to Persia; this helped the famine spread faster, leading to approximately 9 million people starving to death.

**Persia before the Great War**

Long before the outbreak of World War One, when the hegemony of the great European imperial powers peaked, particularly in the Balkans, Iran was struggling hard to survive. Political deployments among the powers, beginning a decade earlier, aimed to maintain power in Europe. One consequence of these political deployments was the 1907 alliance between the Russian and British empires which had severe impact on Iran\(^6\). The two colonial powers signed an agreement to terminate their rivalry over Iran. The Anglo-Russian agreement assisted the rivals to settle their differences over Iran; they partitioned it into two regions of influence, and one neutral zone. Russia took charge of the northern part, Britain controlled the southeastern part, and the remainder was declared a neutral zone.\(^7\) The agreement stated that the two parties ‘mutually engaged to respect the integrity and independence of Persia,’ and that both the Russians and British had signed the agreement to work together to preserve order in Persia. Article one of the agreement established that Britain agreed neither to pursue for herself nor for any other third power, any political or commercial concessions such as seeking concessions for banks, telegraphs, railways, roads or transport beyond a line starting from Qasr-e-Shirin through Isfahan, Yazd, and ending at a point on the Persian border with the intersection of the Russian and Afghan frontiers. Article two stated that Russia would also avoid seeking similar concessions beyond a line starting from the Afghan border passing through Gazik, Birjand, Kerman, and ending at Bandar Abbas.\(^8\)

Article three offered both powers the freedom to obtain concessions within their spheres of interest. Article four over-wrote the Persian debts. Over four decades, the Qajar rulers had

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borrowed large sums of money. Knowing there would be no repayment, article five gave the two colonial powers freedom for mutual agreement in sharing the revenue from post, fisheries, customs and telegraphs; they also agreed to control the revenue sources. It is undeniable that the 1907 Anglo-Russian Agreement was a response to the 1906 Iranian Constitutional Revolution, and the Constitution granted by the dying Mozafaredin Shah in January 1907. The Constitution established the rule that the Shah should be a ceremonial figurehead and that power should rest with the elected government. The 1907 agreement was rendered obsolete because both parties repeatedly violated it. Britain’s 1908 oil discovery in the southwestern, neutral part of Iran, and Russian invasion of other parts of Persia were instances of the agreement’s violation. The British remained passive about Russian aggression and invasion leading to the infamous Ultimatum of 1911. This passivity in the face of Russian’s invasion can only be explained by fear of Germany and the need to keep a good relationship with Russia. Aiming to undermine the Constitutional Movement, both powers actively interfered in Persian affairs under various pretexts, especially with the advent of civil war. The 1909 coalition that brought together secular intellectuals, open-minded clergymen, Northern and Southern tribes, freedom fighters from Azerbaijan and Guilan, and people from different sects and cults to form the Constitutional Movement, collapsed shortly after its establishment.

The civil war was becoming widespread as the gap between the revolutionaries emerged on several dimensions. Politically, two rival factions entered the parliamentary election conflict. The conservatives, including traditional politicians, constitutional clergymen, and the state and county warriors, and known as the ‘Moderate Party,’ gained a majority in parliament. The ‘Democrat Party’ which formed the second largest political force, belonged to the secularists and the leftists. Behind this democratic façade, the competition turned into rivalry. Sheikh Fazlollah Noori, who played a prominent role in the Constitutional movement’s victory, was tried and executed, sparking outrage amongst contemporary clerics. Another prominent clergyman who played a key role in the Constitutional Revolution was Ayatollah Behbahani; he was in conflict with the Democrats, and was later shot by them. Public order and security was shattered – thugs and criminals began looting. Such disorder offered Russia an opportunity to occupy Tabriz, the

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9 Kazemzadeh, *Russia and Britain in Persia, 1864-1914.*
second largest city of Iran while giving Britain an alibi to deploy its army in insecure Bushehr. When Mohammad Ali Shah, Mozafareedin Shah’s successor, was replaced by his 12 year old son, Ahmad Shah, parliament was reconvened. Earnestly desiring to return the country to order, and to face Russia and Britain, Persia asked America for help. America sent W. Morgan Shuster, a noted lawyer and financial expert, as Treasurer General of Persia, to reform the country’s finances because Persia was heavily indebted to Russia and Britain.

Persians embraced Shuster’s proposed reforms and the parliament gave him plenary powers, but the two European powers, Russia and Britain, ferociously opposed his reform proposals as they thought this would serve to mitigate Persia’s dependency on them. Shuster was so successful in reforming the finances that the British and Russians decided to undermine him. The 1911 Russian Ultimatum demanded Shuster’s deportation, an assurance that no foreign nationals would be recruited without Russian and British consent, and ransom payment for the deployment of Russia’s troops. The Ultimatum amounted to nothing less than an effort to reduce the northern part of the country to the status of a semi-dependent colony. The second parliament rejected the Ultimatum, leading Russia to send troops towards the capital, and to expand its troops in Azerbaijan while Britain continued to maintain and increase its garrison of Indian troops in Busheher. Naser-ol-Molk, the regent governor and Samsam-ol-Saltaneh, the Prime Minister, were forced to confront parliament, and ask the chief of police to shut it down. The Persians were left with no choice but to comply with the demands. Shuster left Persia in 1912 and parliament was dissolved. Upon his return to the United States, he wrote a book about Russian and British exploitation of Iran and dedicated it to the Persians. In a much-cited passage, Shuster criticized the influence of the two European Powers’ presence in Iran, and summarized its pernicious consequences as ‘it was obvious that the people of Persia deserve much better than what they are getting, that they wanted us to succeed, but it was the British and the Russians who were determined not to let us succeed.’ In the absence of parliament, Persia was ruled by a regent and an acting cabinet on behalf of the king, Ahmad Shah. However, the conflicts, instability, rebellion and killing of religious minorities continued. On July 21, 1914, the young

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10 Bayandor, “Iran and the First World War”.
Ahmad Shah was formally crowned Shah of Iran. Only a week after his coronation, World War One broke out in Europe, an event precipitated by Austria’s declaration of war against Serbia.

**Violation of the Neutrality and the Famine**

When the war began in Europe, Iran was too weakened to fight a war – there was no army to rely on and no money in the Treasury. To avoid entanglement in the war between the Allies and the Central Powers, the Prime Minister of the time, Mustaufi al-Mamalik declared Persia’s complete neutrality. However, given the history of Russian and British meddling in Persia’s affairs, and the 1907 Anglo-Russian Agreement, Persia’s neutrality was unlikely to be respected. The countries involved in the conflict ignored the neutrality, and Persia became a battleground for Russian, British, and Turkish troops. At the outbreak of World War One, the British had ordered the Indian Viceroy to send a naval force to Shatt-al-Arab on the Persian Gulf to occupy Abadan, its oil refinery, and some Iraqi cities. 5,000 Indian men and 1,200 horses sailed from Bombay, arriving in the vicinity of Bahrain with a number of battleships. On November 5, 1914, Britain announced war on the Ottomans in Iraq, a day later invading the southern part of Iraq and also capturing Abadan and its oil refinery. After defeating the Turks in Iraq, and securing the Shatt-al-Arab waterway, the British turned their attention to the occupation of further areas of southern Persia, especially the oil region of Khuzestan. In January 1915, the British took Mohammareh and Ahwaz. Displaying total disregard for Persia’s neutrality, the British military was put in place to police the area. The British had two objectives in dispatching troops to Persia: most importantly, to protect the valuable but vulnerable oil refineries in Khuzestan, but also to support the forces in the east which were in conflict in Basra, Iraq.

On the other hand, the Ottoman army supported by the German military, entered Azerbaijan, passing through the western borders to Hamedan, and approaching the Caucasian and Russian borders. Russia and Britain sent additional troops into the country. Russia extended its troops from Bandar-e-Anzali to Isfahan and also fought against the Ottomans in Azerbaijan. The war between the Ottomans and the Russians led to changes in the forces occupying

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14 Bayandor, “Iran and the First World War”.
particular regions of Persia and Azerbaijan. The Ottomans had always been interested in Persia, revealing this in their Pan-Islamic outreach to the region. The Pan-Islamic outreach stemmed from the reign of Sultan Abdulhamid II and continued up to the war. The 1911 Committee of Unity and Progress had stated that ‘…efforts should be made to bring about an understanding between Persia and Turkey, with the ultimate object of affecting a political and economic union between the two countries.’ This Committee also made it clear that the Sunni-Shia differences between the two countries were not ‘important enough to prevent an alliance and cooperation between the Ottoman Empire and [Persia].’

In December 1914, the Ottomans decided to occupy the Caucasus. Their initial success caused the Russians to evacuate Tabriz and withdraw some of their forces from Azerbaijan. After the Russian troops withdrew, the Ottomans invaded the Persian cities of Khoy, Urumia and Saujbulak. When, in 1915, the Ottoman forces raided Tabriz, they were warmly welcomed by the residents who saw the Turks as saviours from the despised Russians.

The Ottoman occupation of Tabriz was, however, short-lived as the Russians pushed them back, reoccupying the city; the Turks suffered a major defeat. The Russians not only intended to clear Azerbaijan of the Ottoman troops, but they also aimed to increase instability and civil war by inciting Christians to attack Muslims in the northern part of Persia. In the meantime, Germany started to focus its action in Persia in a ‘divisionary and subversive manner.’ The Ottomans suffered a major defeat from Russia in Azerbaijan and also lost to the British in Mesopotamia; Germany then commenced a clandestine mission to instigate anti-Russian and British sentiment. Persian democrats, nationalists, merchants, tribal members and the gendarmerie soldiers became the target of pro-Central Power propaganda. In fact, Germany wanted Persia to repudiate its neutrality and to unite with the Central Powers because they recognized local anti-British and anti-Russian sentiment. The Germans tempted the Persians with many promises to join the Central Powers, but failed to keep them. They were merely taking advantage of the strong Persian anti-British and anti-Russian views, using them as a means of

16 Majd, The Great Famine and Genocide in Persia, 37.
17 Majd, The Great Famine and Genocide in Persia, 55.
causing unrest and trouble for Britain and Russia. However, the Germans were unsuccessful in thwarting the British and the Russians. With British gains in Khuzestan and Russian success in Azerbaijan, it proved an excellent opportunity to develop a new Anglo-Russian Treaty over Iran. On March 4, 1915, Russia notified Britain and France that Constantinople and the Dardanelles should be included in its Empire, offering in return to be gentle with Anglo-French designs on the Near East. Having undertaken consummate negotiations, France and Britain both finally conceded to Russia’s demands. Eight days after the Russian notification concerning the inclusion of Constantinople and the Dardanelles, the British demanded that the ‘neutral’ region of Iran be placed under its influence. Then, on March 20, the Russians insisted on the inclusion of Isfahan and Yazd within its sphere of influence.

During the war, Tehran supposedly managed the political reorientation and decisions which resulted from the war situation in Europe and the East. However, the real decision makers were the British and the Russians whose influence on the government was undeniable. Sykes states that ‘No power was less prepared to meet the obligations and sacrifices imposed by the World War than Persia, and no power exhibited such impotence in protecting its boundaries and its subjects.’\textsuperscript{19} He argues that Persia ‘suffered from the total inability of her government to protect its loudly proclaimed neutrality’.\textsuperscript{20} Heads of government were appointed or dismissed based on their approach towards the Russians and British, and ultimately their decisions. On February 20, 1915, Mustaufi al-Mamalik reconstituted his cabinet, but on March 13 he was forced to resign and Moshir-ed-Dowleh was appointed in his stead. Both Mustaufi-al-Mamalik and Moshir-ed-Dowleh were coerced into resignation by the Russians and the British, apparently because they were unable to counter German activities in Persia. On May 1, 1915 Ein-ed-Dowleh was appointed; an appointment favored by the Russians and British but opposed by those Persian nationalists who supported the Germans and the Ottomans. In July, Ein-ed-Dowleh resigned after a protracted crisis, and for several weeks the country was without a cabinet. The Nationalists in the parliament were able to bring back Mustaufi-al-Mamalik and restore his

\textsuperscript{20} Sykes, \textit{Persia}, 154.
cabinet on August 22, 1915. Rumor had it that the new cabinet had started to toy with the idea of joining the Central Powers, something that would undermine Russian and British power.21

The re-appointment of Mustaufi-al-Mamalik was a direct threat to Russia and Britain. The two powers risked losing their grip on the country. The Persian resistance group included the political elite, the tribes and ordinary people. Popular Persian resistance to the British and Russians was a direct consequence of the Ottoman defeat. But, its main cause can be traced back to the *Fatwas* issued by the Shia clergy. Germany and the Ottomans were clearly aware of the importance of religion in mobilizing the masses to advance their political aims. The Russians were attacked in Guilan by Mirza Kuchick Khan-e-Jangali who inflicted considerable casualties. The British vice consul was assassinated in Shiraz, and another official was injured in Isfahan in response to the British massacre of the Tangestanis in Bushehr. The Russians and the British left Isfahan, Yazd and Kerman because they predicted German-instigated violence from the Persians. Terrified about losing the country, the Russians and British demanded the resignation of the new governor, Mokhber-os-Saltaneh. He was immediately replaced by the famous anglophile, Qavam-ol-Molk. The Russians and British regained their power by occupying Rasht and sacking the Turkish consulate and its German guests. Both Russia and Britain dispatched more troops to re-occupy the lost cities of Iran. Anticipating the onset of a coup instigated by the Germans and their Persian sympathizers, Russia had informed the Persian government that an alliance with Germany would not be acceptable. The sudden advance of Russians towards Tehran terrified its inhabitants to such an extent that the Shah decided to transfer the capital to Isfahan. He was, however, later persuaded by the Russians and British that it would be unwise to do so. But, the nationalist elites who were supporting the Ottomans and Germans did leave the capital and moved to Kermnashah. The Germans convinced Reza Gholi-Khan Nezam-ol-Saltaneh, the governor of Lorestan, to join the immigrants in order to form a government. Having formed a Committee of National Defense including immigrants and Lorestan, the Germans declared war against Russia and Britain, but were defeated by the allies.

Anglo-Russian aggression caused much Persian hostility towards the British and Russians. This hostility was a natural reaction to foreign military intervention, but it also resulted

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21 Bayandor, “Iran and the First World War”.
from the opposing military’s propaganda activities among the population.\(^\text{22}\) It was not surprising that the Persians supported the Germans and Ottomans. In addition, the German propaganda machine was quite successful in instigating Persians against the Russians and British. From the war’s beginning, the Germans tried to elicit sympathy from the Persians by covert operations and propaganda. This mission was supported by the operation of an extensive intelligence network in which the most distinctive agent was Wilhelm Wassmuss; he earned the title of ‘the German Lawrence’ or ‘Persian Wassmuss.’ Agents like Wilhelm had to maintain Germany’s reputation and attract the Persians to the Central Powers by spreading rumors. One such rumor was that the Germans and their Emperor, Wilhelm II, had converted to Islam; at times he was called Haji Wilhelm when Germans made speeches to the Persians.\(^\text{23}\) In addition, Intelligence personnel were dispatched to Persia in order to intimidate the British. The Germans were notorious for supporting whatever groups could assist them in their war against the allies in Persia.\(^\text{24}\) On one occasion, the Germans intended to eliminate the Governor of Kerman by helping the Persian Democrats, but days later, they changed their position and united with the Governor to remove the Democrats.\(^\text{25}\) However, the Germans never maintained a strong presence in Persia due to the strength of Russia and Britain. By March 1916, Russia was in complete control of the northern part of Persia, and after capturing Kermanshah, Farman-Farma resigned, Mohammad Vali Khan Sepahdar Tonekaboni was appointed in his place\(^\text{26}\).

Foreign intervention caused the long-standing split in Iranian politics to grow. The central government was so divided by political factions that none of the various cabinets which formed ever lasted more than a few months. The situation was so difficult that Sepahdar Tonekaboni was ready to sign an agreement giving the Treasury Department and military to Britain in return for 200,000 tomans\(^\text{27}\). Following the Ottoman advance in western Persia, the ‘pro-allied’ cabinet of Sepahdar Tonekaboni contemplated joining the Central Powers, exasperating the Russians and British. Because of this plan, he was forced to resign and a new

\(^{23}\) Bayandor, “Iran and the First World War”.
\(^{24}\) Khorsand, “Foreign intervention in Iran during WWI”.
\(^{27}\) Toman: a superunit of the official currency in Persia, the rial. 1 toman = 10 rials.
cabinet was appointed under Vossough-ed-Dowleh on August 14, 1916. Ensuring that the Turks would not want to occupy Tehran, the Russians and British withdrew from Tehran and started to occupy other cities. The Russians had taken Soltanabad on August 30, 1916 but then lost the city to the Turks on September 18. The Turks also occupied Nahavand, Dolatabad and other areas in the vicinity of Soltanabad. The Russians failed in their attempt to retake the cities. However, the Turks were severely defeated in Azerbaijan by the Russians, losing many cities and soldiers. While Britain was securing its sphere, the Russians confronted the Turks and retook Kermanshah, Hamadan, and Qasr-i-Shirin on March 31, 1917. After losing Qasr-i-Shirin, the Turks started to evacuate Persia. By the spring of 1917, the ‘threat of German-Turkish military intervention became practically negligible.’ 28 The Revolution of 1917 which removed the tsarist regime had transformed Russia’s long-lasting oppression of Persians into a friendly relationship.

At its withdrawal from Persia, Russia issued a declaration addressed to the Persian people which stated that the 1907 Agreement of Russia and the Britain is ‘ruptured and broken…troops will be withdrawn from Persia and the Persians will be guaranteed the right to the free determination of their fate’ and the strategy of the greedy countries to use peoples of other nations as slaves is ‘about to be destroyed…the dark days of Persia are finishing. It is also an invitation and notice to the Persians to rise up and protect their rights from the oppression and injustices of foreigners.’ 29 Although Russia had to withdraw its troops from Persia, British troops were soon a substitute which allowed for the expansion of Britain’s sphere of influence. Now that the Germans, Turks and Russians were out of Persia, Britain was flexing its muscles to gain control of the whole country. Although there was no German-Ottoman menace, the British continued to use the South Persia Rifles to police the south and, claiming to restore order, captured many other cities. Anti-British sentiment became stronger after Russian troops withdrew and the British confronted many Persian tribal powers in both the southern and northern part of the country. Britain’s continual confrontation and occupation of Persian cities was despised so much that a contemporary newspaper expressed Persians’ distaste for the presence of the British in their country:

28 Miroshnikov, Iran in World War I, 62-63.
29 Miroshnikov, Iran in World War I, 86.
We consider any unjust action by foreign governments to be a menace to the independence of Persia and against the friendly relations between our Government and that country... We had the same idea when, at the beginning of the war, we opposed the feelings of all special parties and the actions of all foreign agents... how is it possible not to consider the South Persia rifles, which force is hated by the people, as a menace to the independence and integrity of Persia?  

However, Prime Minister of the time, Vossough-ed-Dowleh, was on good terms with the British. He sent a telegram to Sykes, the officer in charge of the South Persia Rifles, thanking him for the restoration of law and order in the southern parts of the country. In the North, the British fought against the Jangalis tribes, taking Rasht, Banadar-e-Anzali and Qazvin. The amicable relationship between the Persian government and the British dramatically facilitated the task of occupying different cities. The government also formally recognized the South Persian Rifles. In June 1917, Vossough-ed-Dowleh resigned and was succeeded by Ala-os-Saltaneh. The new cabinet rescinded their recognition of the South Persia Rifles but this came too late to make a difference. The British were resolute in their so-called restoration of order and law. Following the policy of divide and conquer, they started punishing smaller tribes, leaving the bigger tribes untroubled. Punishments consisted of raids and the massacre of tribal peoples in their remote dwellings, taking their livestock and sabotaging their crops. Having heard of the German’s initial victory on the Western Front in the spring of 1918, the new cabinet felt encouraged to encourage bigger tribes to attack the British. The jihad against the British created numerous encounters between the tribes and the foreigners; the British left the Persians with high casualties. The British continued to seize livestock, taking enough crops for themselves and destroying the remainder. Amidst these chaotic situations, Persia was hit by famine and almost 9 million people lost their lives. In 1914, Persia’s population was 20 million, but by 1919 this was reduced to 11 million. With natural increase, the population should have been 21 million in 1919.

The famine can be traced back to the impact of the drought in early 1916, and the increasing costs of imported and local food. In a newspaper entry of April 19, 1917, Ain-o-

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33 Majd, *The Great Famine and Genocide in Persia*, 123.
Saltaneh wrote: ‘This is a bad year. There was little rain in the winter and now 28 days into the spring, there has not been a drop of rain.’ He continued by stating that the ‘streams are dry, and all grass in the fields and orchards has withered. The spring wheat and barley crop is practically lost. In Tonekabon, only a third of the rice has been cultivated. No one recalls such a dry season.’\(^{34}\) He further noted that in the early days of the Persian New Year, Nowrouz, the weekly death rate was 520 persons as compared to the usual 300 deaths; the extra 220 was indicative of death from hunger. Just days later, he wrote: ‘Famine and hunger prevail in all parts of the country. Moslems and people of all faiths are dying. In Qum, currently, fifty die each day. In Hamadan, 30,000 have registered as destitute,’ the heart-rending part of his description was where he stated that people in Tehran ‘were taking sheep blood from the slaughter house to feed themselves and their children. A dead camel found in a ditch had been stripped of all flesh and hide and during the night even the bones were taken.’\(^{35}\) This is exactly what the Ukrainians faced during the Holodomor. They ate ‘mice, rats, sparrows, ants, [and] earthworms. They ground up bones into flour, and did the same with leather and shoe soles.’\(^{36}\) On scarcity of food in Persia, Cladwell wrote in an October 1917 dispatch entitled ‘Poverty and Suffering in Persia’:

‘…there is such a food shortage, especially of wheat and bread products throughout all parts of Persia…the great bulk of population, being of peasant class, subsist on bread alone, which is…very scare and the supply wholly insufficient.’\(^{37}\)

Another witness to the great famine, the former Prime Minister, Mohammad Vali Khan Tonekaboni Sepahsalar, wrote in his diary of November 19, 1917:

It is now several days since I traveled from Shemiran to Tehran where unbelievable famine and chaos prevail. Wheat is 55 tomans per kharvar\(^ {38} \), rice 70 tomans, and barley 45 tomans, way beyond the means of the less well-off and even the ordinary people. In the five months he was in office, the cabinet of Ala-os-Saltaneh and Mohtasham-ol-Saltaneh, his Minister of Finance, squandered away the entire stock of stored grain. It is now four days since Ain-ed-Dowleh is again Prime Minister. He sent for me and asked me to take over the bread problem. Evidently, they could not

\(^{34}\) Majd, The Great Famine and Genocide in Persia, 37.  
\(^{35}\) Quoted in Majd, The Great Famine and Genocide in Persia, 37.  
\(^{37}\) Quoted in Majd, The Great Famine and Genocide in Persia, 39.  
\(^{38}\) Kharvar – Persian unit of mass. 1 kharvar = 294.8 kilograms or 650 pounds.
find a bigger idiot than me. They neither have grain nor money, and the country is in utter chaos. Not a drop of rain has fallen.\textsuperscript{39}

In a dispatch of December 1917, Cladwell argued that the country was hit by famine because of the war and crop failure. As Dunsterville, a famine eyewitness who entered Persia in January 1918, stated

‘...signs of famine were numerous, and we not infrequently passed the corpse of some poor, weary, hungry fellow who had given up the struggle by the roadside.’\textsuperscript{40}

He blamed the Russians and Ottomans for the famine, arguing that they confiscated great amounts of grain and food during their occupation of Persia. There are many press reports covering the issue of Russians and Ottomans seizing food and grain.\textsuperscript{41} Zoekler claims that the Ottomans were collecting ‘all the wheat and barley they could...’ to export out of Persia.\textsuperscript{42} Russians were also reported for similar actions such as taking the villagers’ livestock, killing innocent people and setting bazaars and private properties on fire. The British tended to blame Russians for the famine;\textsuperscript{43} Sykes stated:

‘The Russians before leaving the trenches, sold ammunition and equipment to the Turks, and then marched north, plundering and pulling down houses as they went in order to secure food and fuel.’\textsuperscript{44}

Among Persia’s foreign invaders, the British contributed greatly to the spread of famine and its destructive impact upon Persians. As it became clear that Persia would experience famine, the British started purchasing and storing grain and food products. British food storage continued while Persians were without any food.

Dunsterville confessed to purchasing food despite being aware of the famine, and his wish not to ‘draw supplies from the country that would still further reduce the stock available for the starving people.’\textsuperscript{45} He stated further that the British had stored sufficient amount of grain and

\textsuperscript{39} Quoted in Majd, \textit{The Great Famine and Genocide in Persia}, 41).
\textsuperscript{40} Lionel C. Dunsteerville, \textit{The Adventure of Dunsterforce}. (London: Edward Arnold, 1920), 20.
\textsuperscript{41} Khorsand, “Foreign intervention in Iran during WWI”.
\textsuperscript{42} Quoted in Majd, \textit{The Great Famine and Genocide in Persia}, 56.
\textsuperscript{43} Khorsand, “Foreign intervention in Iran during WWI”.
\textsuperscript{44} Quoted in Majd, \textit{The Great Famine and Genocide in Persia}, 65.
\textsuperscript{45} Dunsteerville, \textit{The Adventure of Dunsterforce}, 62.
fodder but ‘it was only being held up to secure higher prices.’ A fractional rise in food prices meant the death of many individuals. Purchasing local food was common, but crushing foodstuffs which could not be carried was certainly a deliberate method of preventing Persian access to food. At times, the British had to destroy their food stores in order not to allow the Ottomans to seize them. This can be confirmed by Donohoe’s statement that ‘there was no time to be lost. So, destroying our surplus stores…we set off in the darkness of the night.’ To save space on their cargo ships, the British had also stymied the potential importing of food from India. Moreover, the local transportation including land and river was seized by the British for the transferring of their own war materials, which made it difficult for local farmers to market the small available amount of produce inside the country. The British were unconcerned about the great famine in Persia – preserving space on a cargo ship was more important than millions of Persians lives. The British continued to store food for the consumption of their own soldiers. With the outbreak of famine, diseases associated with it became more widespread. It was now no longer just hunger that killed so many people, but maladies like influenza, typhoid and cholera were also added to the disastrous situations in Persia. The report submitted to the General Assembly of the League of Nations by the Iranian delegation on December 6, 1920, corroborates the plight of the Persians due to the war-caused famine. It states:

At the beginning of the war of 1914-1918, the Persian government, anxious to continue its historic traditions, solemnly declared its neutrality . . . . Despite her neutrality, Persia has been a battlefield during the world cataclysm. Her richest provinces in the north and north-east have been ravaged, divided and disorganized by the Turco-Russian forces. Many are the ruins which cover Persian territory from Makou (a town lying in the extreme north of Persian province Azerbaijan), to the very south. Towns and villages have been pillaged and burned, and hundreds of thousands of men were compelled to say a lasting farewell to their beloved homes and to find death from hunger and cold far from their native provinces. At Teheran, a city of about 500,000 inhabitants, 90,000 persons died of famine for want of bread; since the big lines of communication were cut by the invaders. All the governments which followed each other during the war were faced with insurmountable difficulties which arose from the violation of Persian neutrality. The food providing provinces of Persia – such as Mazenderan, Gilan, Azerbaijan, Hamadan and Kirmanshahan— which were rich in corn, rice and other cereals, were unable to produce anything, owing to the lack of labour and the want of security:

famine, that pitiless scourge, ruled over the greater part of the country and spread ruin and death among its people . . . . massacred by the sword of the invader.\(^{48}\)

The infringement of Persia’s neutrality created a chaotic situation which dramatically affected the whole country. In a memorandum of August 13, 1941, Wallace Smith Murray, the Chief of the Division of Near Eastern Affairs at the United States’ Department of State revealed that although Persia declared neutrality at the outset of World War One, the Great Powers invaded the country, which ‘resulted in untold misery to the Persian people.’\(^{49}\) The Persian profiteers, on the other hand, were partly to blame for this misery as they started hoarding food which contributed to spreading the famine more widely. Food storing by the British and hoarding by the few profiteers contributed to the death of 9 million Persians which can be considered as one of the century’s greatest tragedies. Gholi Majd has described this tragedy as ‘genocide.’ However, labeling this as ‘genocide has raised many eyebrows and caused many controversies. It has been repeatedly argued that the death of 9 million Persians cannot be a genocide event because ‘genocide’ assumes deliberate and willful murdering of a myriad number of people. Some scholars believe it is improbable that the British had any intention of committing genocide against the Persian population because they were only concerned about the war. (In this sense, Holomine was a kind of a side effect of the British war policy in Persia.)\(^{50}\) It is argued that natural and other socio-historical factors were the main reasons for the famine. It is true that natural factors such as the level of atmospheric precipitation, and human and animal pandemics along with other socio-historical factors such as the incapability of the government and its governors’ corruption, helped the famine spread widely. But how would one explain the British confiscation of local foods and cereals, prevention of foodstuffs importation from India, Mesopotamia, and United States, and last but not least, Britain’s adopting of financial policies such as refusing paying oil revenues to Iran? This chapter has no intention whatsoever to call this tragedy ‘genocide,’ but there seem to have been purposeful acts on Britain’s behalf to ignore the loss of many Persians. There is no need to debate the intention of the British or their degree of

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\(^{48}\) Quoted in Majd, *The Great Famine and Genocide in Persia: 1917-1919*, 8
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culpability, because they had the major role in spreading the famine. It seems true that the British only focused on the war, but it is also true that everything else including the fate of Persians was secondary, which suggests deliberate nonchalance about the lives of Persians. The British did not do anything to alleviate the famine in Persia, because Persians were also deemed as ‘racially inferior’ to the British, otherwise they would, probably, have saved them. Pursuing the war at the expense of the lives of many Persians, if not genocide, is definitely a very tragic event. Nevertheless, it is difficult to call the disinterest of the British towards millions of dying Persians anything other than genocidal negligence. The absence of deliberate intention to kill the population of Persia cannot be recognized as an extenuating circumstance which diminishes the responsibility of the British government and military commanders for the suffering and death of so many people in Persia.

Despite the great famine, the British continued the conquest of Persia. At the end of the Great War, Britain was the only dominant influence in Tehran. In 1919, the British foreign secretary, Lord Curzon, offered Persia a £2 million sterling loan, advisers to every department of the government, the supply of ammunition and equipment for the British-trained army, and the construction of railroads in return for access to all Persian oil fields. The Persian Prime Minister, Hassan Vosuq-od-Dowleh, and two cabinet members received a large amount of money as an inducement to support the agreement. After signing the contract and without waiting for the approval of parliament, the British sent finance and military committees to Persia. The Anglo-Persian Agreement of 1919 was widely viewed as one of the serious ramifications of the Great War in Persia, and it gave birth to fierce opposition, and parliament refused to sanction it. The agreement was already null and void by February 1921 when the Persian Cossacks Brigade officer, Reza Khan, in cooperation with the eminent journalist, Sayyid Zia-ad-Din Tabatabai, marched toward Tehran and seized power. This inaugurated a new phase in Iran’s modern history; in May 1921 the British army left Persia. That not very many people in the West would know about the famine in Persia is quite comprehensible. Britain controlled the news outlets spreading information about the war. The British government usually releases its confidential documents to the public after 30 years or so, but the documentation of World War One in Persia
is still under lock and chain. It is a dismal state of affairs that the demise of millions of Persians is not remembered or known outside Persia, but apparently, the time is not ripe for the disclosure of such information, thus one of the major tragic events of the 20th century remains unknown to people around the world.

Conclusion

When World War One began in 1914, Persia had only just celebrated the coronation ceremony of the 18 year old, Ahmad Shah Qajar. The Constitutional Revolution of 1906, Persia’s most important pre-war event, had happened almost a decade before the beginning of the war. However this Revolution was unable to establish itself firmly because it continually suffered from paradoxes and crises. Different groups of people had paradoxical perspectives about the Revolution. Some were idealists; some were more realistic and realized the country’s plight. Therefore, when war broke out there was no unity in the Persian government. The inability of the Persian government to protect the country provoked rebellions and autonomy movements. The Anglo-Russian agreement of 1907 was a direct proof of this chaos in Persia. The agreement which divided Persia into two spheres of influence under the British and Russians with one neutral zone helped rivals to settle their differences in Persia. When Mustaufi al-Mamalik declared Persia’s neutrality, it was likely this would be violated because the country had no army and the Treasury department was without money. Neutrality can only function when the government has both a powerful military and a strong economy. Having neither of these, Persia became a battleground for the Ottomans, British and Russians. They occupied and re-occupied many cities, destroyed many villages, and murdered hundreds of Persian civilians, and caused the Holomine that killed 9 million people. However, despite being one of the major tragic events of the 20th century, today, it is unknown to many people around the world.

51 Roohullah Rahimi. This is not a classified secret, a documentary on Iran during World War I (2014; ansarclip.ir), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=11TkKcgTyjU, accessed on September 25, 2015.