THE SHAH-NâME AND BRITISH PROPAGANDA IN IRAN IN WORLD WAR II

During World War II Iran, although nominally neutral, played an important part in the Allied effort against Nazi Germany. In order to provide a route for delivering military supplies to the Soviet Union, in 1941 British forces occupied the south of Iran, while the Soviets occupied the north. Although there was a serious shortage of vessels, a stream of ships delivered goods to the port of Khorrarmshahr, at the head of the Persian Gulf, for onward delivery by the new railway, completed in 1939, to Bandar Pahlivani on the Caspian. This supply line was known as the Persian Corridor.

As in World War I, much of Iranian public opinion was on the German side, in the hope that Germany would relieve Iran from both the long British and the Russian domination of their country. In the early part of the war, not surprisingly, many Iranians were convinced that Germany would prevail. As part of the effort to persuade Iranians to take the Allied side, the psychological warfare office in London turned to the Persian scholar Dr. (later Professor) Arthur Arberry of Cambridge University, with a view to designing propaganda posters. Arberry, in turn, sought the advice of Mojtabâ Minovî, who was at the time working for the BBC Persian service and editing pro-Alied newspaper Razegâr-e Noor. Minovî persuaded the authorities that, rather than the usual flamboyant “victory” posters, it would be more persuasive to use an adaptation of the Shah-nâme. His point was that it would be far more effective to appeal to Persian nationalist pride than to attempt to inspire a pro-Alied feeling with western images. In a letter to Arberry he wrote that the Persians were a subtle race, used to indirect communication, who for centuries had been accustomed to putting new interpretations to ancient and familiar quotations [1].

Minovî’s advice was to take the story of the tyrant Zâhîh-kâb and Kâvâ, the blacksmith liberator. Not only was this story taught in school but at that time almost every town in Iran had tea houses where it was recited, along with other stories of the Shah-nâme, by professional naqqâlîs. Every Persian, whether literate or not, was familiar with the principal stories of the epic.

In the Shah-nâme Zâhîh-kâb presents himself as a saviour of the Iranian nation, which had been suffering under the rule of the arrogant Jamshîd. Zâhîh-kâb is then turned by Satan into a monster, with a pair of snakes sprouting from his shoulders, which have to be fed daily on human brains. Zâhîh-kâb, to Persian nationalists of the eleventh century, represented the Arabs, who had invaded and destroyed their ancient civilisation. Minovî’s idea was to create a contemporary version of Zâhîh-kâb, portraying him as the hero. The two snakes would represent Mussolini and Tojo, the Japanese commander-in-chief and prime minister, while the devil, who inspires Zâhîh-kâb, and is disguised as a cook in the Shah-nâme, was to be portrayed as Goebbels. The parallels were obvious.

The person chosen to create the posters was Kimon Evan Marango, known as Ken, a Greek-Egyptian political cartoonist who, during the war, produced over 3,000 propaganda cartoons for the British Ministry of Information. Ken prepared the six posters between March and October 1942. One can imagine that they were distributed around the bazaars and to the tea houses where people gathered. To coincide with the Tehran Conference, held at the end of November 1943, the posters were reprinted as a booklet of postcards. At the conference, Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin, aside from other matters, signed a Declaration on Iran that committed the three powers to Iran’s independence. The first card (plate I) shows Iran, the devil, disguised as a cook but with the face of Goebbels, in front of Zâhîh-kâb, who has the face of Hitler. The two snakes sprouting from his shoulder have the faces of Mussolini and Tojo, the Japanese commander-in-chief. The onlookers are all wearing swastikas on their sleeves. The Shah-nâme verses read:

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On Zalhāk’s shoulders two serpents grew by magic and destruction was rained down on the people. The verses on the second card (plate 1), which shows Zalhāk’s victims being executed, read:

The laws of the wise became hidden and the desires of madness became widespread; the hand of government grew long in evil purpose; goodness was only heard of in secret.

Curiously, the iconography here is based on the execution of the socialist and anti-clerical Māndak and his followers, from a much later story in the Širāz-nāme.

The third card (plate 1) shows the nightmare of Zalhāk, in which he dreams of three warriors coming to attack him. Here they are given the faces of Churchill, Stalin and Roosevelt.

Then, from the palace of the emperor, he saw three warriors suddenly appear:

The fourth card (plate 1) shows Kave, the blacksmith, with his leather apron; banner, the symbol of liberty.

He cried and raised his hand before the Shah, “O Shah, I am Kave in demand of justice. There must be a limit to oppression; oppression must always have a just cause.”

The fifth card (plate 1) shows Zalhāk (Hitler) tied on a horse, dragging Satan (Goebbels) by its tail, escorted by the three Allies, while Kave leads the way with his symbolic apron of liberty. The onlookers, seeing Zalhāk’s defeat, have taken off their swastikas.

Strongly he tied his two hands and waist, so that his fetters could not be broken, even by a raging elephant.

The final card (plate 1) in the series shows Zalhāk imprisoned on Mount Demavand. Again, the swastikas have gone.

Swiftly as a post-messenger he brought Zalhāk away and bound him to Mount Demavand and, when the name of Zalhāk became dust, the world was cleansed of its evil.

In addition to Ken’s posters, a similar poster was produced in Isfahān in 1943 by the artist Muṣavver al-Molk. This one shows Hitler, Mussolini and Tojo being pursued by Churchill, Stalin and Roosevelt (figs. 1-2, plate 2). Mussolini has fallen from his horse, shot by an arrow fired by Churchill, showing the surrender of Italy. In the border are stirring verses from the Širāz-nāme, in which the hero Rostam is described fitting eagle’s feathers to an arrow and shooting it at his enemy. This poster was commissioned by the son of Sir Percy Sykes, erstwhile British consul in Kermanshah and founder of the South Persia Rifles in World War I. The younger Sykes had been sent to Isfahān in World War II with the mission of encouraging the Bākhshū tribes to resist the Germans in the event that they succeeded in breaking through Stalingrad and invading Iran.

It is impossible to tell how effective this propaganda was, or whether it succeeded in turning the hearts and minds of the Iranians. Doubtless, with its references to Iranian independence in ancient times, it touched their hearts, but their minds, it is safe to assume, remained unaffected. As it happened, the Soviet defeat of the German forces at Stalingrad rendered all these efforts unnecessary.

Notes
1. The story of the Ken posters is told in depth by Valerie Holman, “Ken’s Cartoons in the Second World War,” History Today (March 2002).

Illustrations

Front cover:

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Inside the text:
Fig. 1. The fragment of the poster by Muṣavver al-Molk.
Fig. 2. The fragment of the same poster.
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