



HAL
open science

Russian Hubris in Iran: Diplomacy, Clientelism, and Intervention (1907-1912)

Alisa Shablovskaia

► **To cite this version:**

Alisa Shablovskaia. Russian Hubris in Iran: Diplomacy, Clientelism, and Intervention (1907-1912). *Ab Imperio - Studies of New Imperial History and Nationalism in the Post-Soviet Space*, 2019, 2019 (1), pp.79-103. halshs-02494345

HAL Id: halshs-02494345

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-02494345>

Submitted on 9 Mar 2022

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Alisa SHABLOVSKAIA

**RUSSIAN HUBRIS IN IRAN:
DIPLOMACY, CLIENTELISM,
AND INTERVENTION (1907–1912)***

By the time the Russian and British Empires signed the August 1907 convention that divided Iran into spheres of influence between the two powers, Russian political and economic presence in Iran had been seriously challenged by the nascent Iranian constitutional movement. The business of numerous Russian commercial firms operating in Iran since the late nineteenth century was threatened by the spread of disorder in the Iranian provinces. The subsequent military intervention by Russia on Iranian territory in 1911 and 1912 is usually perceived as an extension of counterrevolutionary policies across the border and a manifestation of Russia's colonial domination over a weakened neighbor. At the same time, as the fruit of years-long debates in St. Petersburg on the interministerial level, the intervention put into question the previous strategy of Russian foreign policy seeking to sustain balance in the region vis-à-vis the British and the Ottomans. The critical analysis of the decision-making process leading to the intervention reveals the key role of reports coming from numerous Russian consuls in Tehran and the provinces in the escalation of the crisis in 1911.

* The author acknowledges the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions.

Russian foreign policy seems to be a well-researched topic, albeit only utterly elitist. Usually scholars do not look beyond the documents produced by top ministerial officials and ambassadors in foreign countries, and they perceive the diplomatic staff at the intermediary level and on the ground (consuls) as mere tools for the execution of ministerial orders. This top-down perspective envisions foreign policy as a product of elite strategizing, ideological biases, and personal whims, while completely ignoring the process of accumulating, processing, and interpreting information by the rank-and-file ministerial cadres as the foundation of modern institutionalized diplomatic decision making.¹ Accordingly, the perceptions as well as the institutional and personal circumstances of Russian consular and military personnel in Iran as the main source of information for policymakers in St. Petersburg have never been the object of a systemic academic inquiry.

During the late imperial period, with the decline of the importance of diplomatic ceremonies and the military's involvement in foreign policy, career diplomats formed a distinctive professional cohort.² Their sociocultural identities and institutional loyalties were now playing as important a role in forming foreign policy as the strategic considerations of top government officials. The global historiography of consular institutions traditionally focused on the diplomatic hierarchy, consuls' interactions with local societies, and the impact of these contacts on the course of foreign policy. The few available studies of Russian consular activities, however, squarely focus on the macro-level analysis of interinstitutional rivalry between the military and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs,³ or the equally structuralist survey of the power-knowledge nexus that shaped the perceptions and identities of diplomats (without looking at it as a multidirectional process of information exchange).⁴ The situation of contact between foreign and domestic knowledge, communication and miscommunication informed by manifold interactions and competing interests can be properly analyzed only at the level of regional histories.⁵ This article aims at studying this situation based

¹ For the criticism of this approach, see, for example, Sabine Dullin. *Des hommes d'influences. Les ambassadeurs de Staline en Europe, 1930–1939*. Paris, 2001. P. 17.

² See Matthew S. Anderson. *The Rise of Modern Diplomacy, 1450–1919*, London; New York, 1993. Pp. 103, 118, 130.

³ Alex Marshall. *The Russian General Staff and Asia, 1800–1917*. Abingdon; New York, 2006. P. 16.

⁴ Denis Volkov. *Russia's Turn to Persia. Orientalism in Diplomacy and Intelligence*. Cambridge, 2018.

⁵ See, for example, Étienne Forrestier-Peyrat. *Retrouver le Caucase: une histoire de la diplomatie frontalière (1905–1938)* / Thesis. Institute of political studies. Paris, 2015;

on the material of Iran during the constitutional movement, when numerous Russian consuls in various provincial centers served as the eyes and ears of their superiors in St. Petersburg. While forming a certain vision of reality for senior government officials, local consuls themselves were affected by many factors, ranging from their political views to commercial interests.

Russia's policy toward Iran at the turn of the twentieth century was essentially a colonial one (epitomized in a popular saying, "A chicken is not a bird and Persia is not foreign country"⁶). It resembled Russian imperialist expansion in Korea and Manchuria guided by Sergei Witte's "peaceful encroachment" doctrine. The smashing defeat in the Russo-Japanese War in 1905 nullified all Russia's colonial gains in the Far East, but "peaceful encroachment" in Iran only intensified. It was checked by nascent Iranian nationalism and opposition from the Ottoman and British Empires. Accordingly, the signing of the Anglo-Russian regional entente in 1907 removed much pressure from Russia and facilitated its expansionism in Iran.⁷ The high volume of transborder trade and the diversity of Russian commercial interests in Iran required intermediation by a vast network of diplomatic offices on the ground. These people formed a distinctive consular community shaped by shared experiences, conflicts, and the foreign ministry's policy guidelines. Their worldview curiously combined the entrenched culture of orientalism (here understood as a system of mental projections toward the Other justifying the ideology of colonial domination⁸) and profound local knowledge. The tasks of consular officers included collecting intelligence information but also facilitating transactions by various Russian and Iranian

Hans-Lukas Kieser. *A Quest for Belonging: Anatolia beyond Empire and Nation*. Istanbul, 2007.

⁶ Firuz Kazemzadeh. *Russia and Britain in Persia: Imperial Ambitions in Qajar Persia*. Rev. edition. London; New York, 2013. P. 676.

⁷ Cf. Rose L. Greaves. *Some Aspects of the Anglo-Russian Convention and Its Working in Persia, 1907–14*, Part I–II // *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*. 1968. Vol. 31. Pp. 69–91, 290–308.

⁸ For a discussion of Russian Orientalism, see David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye. *The Curious Fate of Edward Said in Russia* // Philippe Bornet and Svetlana Gorshenina (Eds.). *L'orientalisme des marges: éclairages à partir de l'Inde et de la Russie*. Lausanne, 2014. Pp. 81–94. Acknowledging the ambivalent nature of Russian orientalists' engagement with their subject, this study relies on the broad understanding of orientalism as a "syndrome of beliefs, attitudes and theories" that acquires a flexible structure in the context of vast imperial networks, where no clear border between the Orient and the Occident can be traced. See Bryan S. Turner. *Orientalism, Postmodernism and Globalism*. London, 1994. Pp. 103, 197.

subjects on behalf of the Russian government. Their work was complicated by the extreme politicization of relations between the two countries,⁹ which was both alleviated and aggravated by the tactic of patronizing local pro-Russian elements (this tactic was also applied in Korea toward the royal dynasty, in Mongolia toward nationalists, and in the Ottoman Empire toward Armenians).¹⁰ As a result, in their work, Russian consuls had to balance the imperialism of Russian official foreign policy, pragmatism in resolving security concerns in the borderlands, and the need to accommodate the sensibilities of native elites.

This predicament was probably not specific to Russian consuls. The much better explored history of consular officers in other colonial empires also shows that they had to reconcile quite contradictory roles. As the chief motor of imperial expansion, they opposed the use of military force by the metropole and acted as ultimate mediators and agents of knowledge transfer.¹¹ Depending on the circumstances, one or another role took precedence over others. Historians also tend to simplify the multifaceted worldview of local consular officers for the sake of simplifying the argument. Therefore, the same people would be depicted in a study of aggressive imperialist foreign policy differently from their depiction in a history of “knowledge transfer.” This article looks at the entire spectrum of policies and attitudes of Russian consuls in Iran, tracing the factors that affected their perception of the Iranian “other.” We try to reconstruct the process of Russian diplomats’ formation of the picture of Iranian events as information transferred along the stages of institutional hierarchy, beginning from everyday interactions

⁹ The multifaceted politicization of contacts with Iran revealed itself not only in the form of Anglo-Russian rivalry but also in the intensification of Russian Caucasian politics. See Kimitaka Matsuzato. *General-gubernatorstva v rossiiskoi imperii: ot étnicheskogo k prostranstvennomu podkhodu* // Ilya Gerasimov et al. (Eds.). *Novaia imperskaia istoriia postsovetskogo prostranstva*. Kazan, 2004. Pp. 427–458.

¹⁰ B. B. Pak. *Rossiiskii diplomat K. I. Veber i Koreia*. Moscow, 2013; Nakami Tatsuo. *Russian Diplomats and Mongol Independence, 1911–1915* // Stephen Kotkin and Bruce A. Elleman (Eds.). *Mongolia in the Twentieth Century: Landlocked Cosmopolitan*. London; New York, 1999. Pp. 69–78; Onur Önel. *The Tsar’s Armenians: A Minority in Late Imperial Russia*. London; New York, 2017. P. 3.

¹¹ Lyman H. Stebbins. *British Imperialism in Qajar Iran*. London, 2016; Barbara Brooks. *Japan’s Imperial Diplomacy: Consuls, Treaty Ports, and War in China, 1895–1938*. Honolulu, 2000; Christian Windler. *La diplomatie comme expérience de l’autre: consuls français su Maghreb, 1700–1840*. Geneva, 2002; Gülay Tulasoglu. “His Majesty’s consul” in Saloniki: Charles Blunt (1800–1864) ein Europäischer Konsul als Agent der Modernisierung in der osmanischen Provinz. Berlin, 2015.

on the ground by consuls and ending with the resolutions adopted by senior ministerial officials in St. Petersburg. This multistage yet coherent process in which field officers transferred their opinions to the decision-making authorities played a crucial role in prompting Russian military intervention in the autumn of 1911. Another factor behind that decision was the desire to counter the demise of Russian international prestige and regional influence, which brought about various, often contradictory, policy recommendations. As a result, the policy of limited interference in Iranian state affairs, mostly through building and exploiting patron-client relationships with Iranian subjects, clashed with the omnipresent obsession with the Great Game and other grand narratives of interstate rivalry.

The Russian military intervention in Iran in 1911 has been studied either within the general context of Russian imperialism or as the final episode in the history of the Iranian constitutional movement. Classical Iranian works on the constitutional movement argued the existence of a Russian conspiracy and a duplicitous policy aimed at the suppression of the democratic movement in Iran and the annexation of Iranian territories.¹² Soviet scholarship on the Iranian constitutional movement (with a few exceptions consisting of apologetic works mainly denouncing British imperialism) focused on oppressive tsarist foreign policies, thus echoing the Iranian anticolonial stance.¹³ Similar topics were featured in publications produced within Western academia beginning in the 1950s, focused on Russian imperialism and the Anglo-Russian rivalry.¹⁴ More recent international scholarship on the constitutional movement largely focuses on the transborder revolutionary movement in the South Caucasus, stressing the intellectual and cultural differences between the Russian and Iranian societies and leaving aside

¹² See, for example, Ahmad Kasravi. *Tarikh-i hijdahsalah-yi Azarbayjan*. Tehran, 1340/1961.

¹³ See the standard study: Mikhail Ivanov. *Persidskaia revoliutsiia, 1905–1911*. Moscow, 1957. The most nuanced account of the Russian attitude toward the Iranian Constitutionalist Movement can be found in Aleksandr Matveev. *Sotsial'no-politicheskaia bor'ba v Astarabade: vtoraiia polovina 1911–nachalo 1912 gg. (materialy k istorii revoliutsii 1905–1911 gg. v Irane)*. Tashkent, 1957.

¹⁴ Kazemzadeh. *Russia and Britain in Persia*; Robert A. McDaniel. *The Shuster Mission and the Persian Constitutional Revolution*. Minneapolis, 1974; Hossein Nazem. *Russia and Great Britain in Iran (1900–1914)*. Teheran, 1975; Jennifer Siegel. *Endgame: Britain, Russia and the Final Struggle for Central Asia*. London, 2000; Mansour Bonakdarian. *Britain and the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1906–1911*. Syracuse, 2006; Savka Andic. *When Garibaldi Went to Azerbaijan: A Study of British Perceptions of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution, 1906–7 // Iranian Studies*. 2012. Vol. 45. Pp. 597–618.

the role of Russian diplomacy in the demise of the Iranian constitutionalist movement.¹⁵

Those few scholars who have studied Russian archival sources on the topic tend to attribute Russian interventionist policies to pragmatic security concerns bolstered by constant exchanges with consular staff in Iran.¹⁶ Drawing mainly on Russian archival sources from the Russian State Historical Archive (RGIA), the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts (IVR), and the Foreign Policy Archive of the Russian Empire (AVPRI), this article seeks to explicate imperial and orientalist elements in the worldview of the Russian diplomatic corps in Iran, and how they were informed by everyday work experiences, clientelism in dealing with the locals, and interinstitutional tensions. This should contribute to drawing a more nuanced and pragmatic interpretation of Russian foreign policy.¹⁷

Russian consuls in Iran

At the turn of the twentieth century the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs entered a period of restructuring and reforms, slightly lagging behind other European powers.¹⁸ Traditionally reserved to members of the aristocracy, the diplomatic service experienced the transformative influence of the democratization of knowledge and rise of social mobility. The Oriental Department at the University of St. Petersburg and the Lazarev Institute of Oriental Languages in Moscow – the two main schools teaching oriental languages and cultures – became more and more accessible to students from middle-class families. This made them the easiest entryways to a prestigious diplomatic career.¹⁹ These institutions, along with a compul-

¹⁵ Vladimir Genis. *Kavkazskie boeviki v Persii 1908–1911 // Voprosy istorii*. 1997. No. 5. Pp. 3–20; Cosroe Chaqueri. *The Russo-Caucasian Origins of the Iranian Left*. Richmond, 2001; Iago Gocheleishvili. *Georgian Sources on the Iranian Constitutional Revolution, 1905–1911 // Stephanie Cronin (Ed.). Iranian-Russian Encounters*. London; New York, 2012. Pp. 207–231; Moritz Deutschmann. *Cultures of Statehood, Cultures of Revolution // Ab Imperio*. 2013. No. 2. Pp. 165–190; Houri Berberian. *Armenians and the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1905–1911*. Boulder, 2001.

¹⁶ Vladimir Genis. *Vitse-konsul Vvedenskii: sluzhba v Persii i Bukharskom khanstve, 1906–1920*. Moscow, 2003; Moritz Deutschmann. *Iran and Russian Imperialism: The Ideal Anarchists, 1800–1914*. London, 2016.

¹⁷ Some of the documents were published in *Sbornik diplomatichekikh dokumentov kasaiushchikhsia sobytii v Persii*. Vols. 1–4. St. Petersburg, 1911–13.

¹⁸ See Alastair Kocho-Williams. *Russian and Soviet Diplomacy, 1900–39*. Houndmills, 2012.

¹⁹ Basile Nikitine. *La Perse que j'ai connue: 1909–1919*. Paris, 1941. P. 27.

sory two-year training course at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, provided academic instruction in the European orientalist tradition.²⁰ They did not give students any practical training in consular work in the East, especially in the realm of jurisprudence.²¹ Sons of destitute gentry, physicians, and army officers, the young men starting their studies in oriental languages were passionate about ancient history and oriental aesthetics. Once they joined the service, however, they quickly embraced the discourse of European cultural superiority over the East – something their teachers had specifically warned against.²²

Aristocratic provenance of the diplomatic service made it particularly susceptible to nepotism. By 1900, several diplomatic dynasties represented Russian interests in Iran, which did not necessarily compromise the professionalism of young consuls: children and other relatives of senior diplomats often had the advantage of better acquaintance with the practical side of their service and the realities on the ground.²³ Still, the main reason for promotion was personal merit. The ideal of diplomatic professionalism envisioned high productivity, profound expertise in the host society, and good public writing skills.²⁴ In practice, to become an ambassador or plenipotentiary minister, an aristocratic background and wide network of personal contacts within Russian officialdom were as important as professionalism. Two extreme examples of Russian consuls who were exceptional were Nikolai Passek of Shiraz, who had no special training and relied exclusively on his personal ties in the ministry's Asiatic Department, and the plenipotentiary minister in Tehran Pëtr Vlasov, whose career was driven solely by his professionalism.²⁵ The divide within the diplomatic corps between aristocrats and commoners was gradually giving way in importance to the gap between ethnically Russian and non-Russian diplomats. In the atmosphere of rising Russian nationalism, those who did not qualify as “true Russians”

²⁰ On Russian academic orientalism, see David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye. *Russian Orientalism: Asia in the Russian Mind from Peter the Great to the Emigration*. New Haven, 2010.

²¹ Nikitine. *La Perse*. P. 75.

²² This was the case of Vladimir Zhukovskii and his student Nikolai Bravin. Volkov. *Russia's Turn*. P. 158.

²³ For example, consul Petrov was the son of the Russian consul in Tabriz; Pokhitonov was the son of the consul general; and Romanovskii was the son-in-law of the consul in Mashhad.

²⁴ S. V. Chirkin. *Dvadsat' let sluzhby na Vostoke*. *Zapiski tsarskogo diplomata*. Moscow, 2006. P. 155.

²⁵ *Ibid.* Pp. 58, 92.

tended to compensate for their inferiority with fervent manifestations of patriotism.²⁶ Another important internal divide distinguished diplomats with a military service background from civil servants. These structural differences, along with personal animosities (often stirred by accusations of dubious financial activities²⁷) were vital in forging the commonality of experience as a precondition of professional solidarity and a certain esprit de corps. These bonds were so powerful that they could even undermine the nominal institutional hierarchy.

Receiving an appointment in Iran gave diplomats a perfect opportunity to improve their material situation. Prices were relatively low,²⁸ and opportunities to run a business or benefit from construction projects under Russian patronage were abundant.²⁹ While the workload of consuls in the Russia-dominated northern part of the country was very high, in the south they had few responsibilities beyond making sure that the Russian flagpole was higher than that of the British consulate.³⁰ Until 1908, Russian consuls in Asia were not even regularly informed about European politics, and corruption (the notorious oriental *bakhsheesh*) was not thoroughly prosecuted until 1909.³¹ The ensuing intermingling of Russian diplomatic institutions with the local administration and “indigenization” of the consular staff provoked much concern in the ministry. According to the diplomat and future orientologist, Basile Nikitine (Vasilii Nikitin), plans were envisioned for the professional rehabilitation of consuls:

After several years spent in a remote consulate lost somewhere in Asia, Russian officials need to return to the Ministry and undergo one or two years of training in order to shake the rust off them, open up their horizons in the realm of international politics and, most importantly,

²⁶ The minister of foreign affairs in 1895–1896, Aleksei Lobanov-Rostovskii, exemplified Russian neo-Slavophile snobbishness. I. S. Rybachenok. *Poslednii bastion*. V. N. Lamzdorf i Miuirtsshtegskoe soglashenie 1903 goda // A. V. Ignat’ev et al. (Eds.). *Rossiiskaia diplomatiia v portretakh*. Moscow, 1992. P. 288.

²⁷ *Ibid.* P. 167; Genis. *Vitse-konsul Vvedenskii*. Pp. 72–83.

²⁸ Chirkin. *Dvadsat’ let sluzhby*. P. 92; Nikitine. *La Perse*. P. 24.

²⁹ Cordonnier to the Director of Finances in Tabriz. June 3, 1914 // *The Diplomatic Archives of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs (ADMAEF)*. *Correspondance politique et commerciale*. NS. Perse. 10. Pp. 143–146.

³⁰ Chirkin. *Dvadsat’ let sluzhby*. P. 90.

³¹ Minorsky to Sazonov. March 1917 March // *Institute of Oriental Manuscripts (IVR)*. F. 154. Op. 2. D. 197. L. 21. For a more general description of the “cultural marginality” of Russian consuls, see Alfred J. Rieber. *Persistent Factors in Russian Foreign Policy* // Hugh Ragsdale (Ed.). *Imperial Russian Foreign Policy*. Cambridge, 1994. P. 322.

immerse [themselves] in the life of the metropole with all the social and intellectual resources that it offers.³²

This project was not implemented, and the last decades of the old regime were marked by growing resentment in the ministry toward field personnel.

By 1907 Russian consular offices were present in thirteen Iranian cities: Tehran, Bushire, Tabriz, Mashhad, Astarabad (Gorgan), Kermanshah, Kerman, Rasht, Isfahan, Urmia, Sistan, Ardabil, and Khoy.³³ The Iranian central government's hold over provinces was often nominal, which offered Russians diplomats numerous possibilities to interfere in local affairs using their extraterritoriality status. Stipulated by the 1828 Treaty of Turkmenchay, this status permitted Russian diplomats to sustain vast networks of agents of influence, from Qajar princes to Armenian peasants. At some point in the late nineteenth century, Russian officials found themselves manipulated by their clients who were abusing the right to seek legal protection in joint Iranian–Russian courts. In Nikitine's words, "It was a real injury forcing the consulate into a series of inextricable situations created by the arbitrary actions of the [Iranian] authorities and the absence of any firmly established legal order based on well-defined laws."³⁴ Recognizing that mutual manipulations by Russian officials and their Iranian clients were contributing to the general chaos,³⁵ the Russian minister in Tehran, Ivan Korostovets, proposed in 1915 to limit the circle of protégés to tribal chiefs and influential noblemen (as the British did).³⁶ This initiative was not authorized by the ministry.

The Russian diplomatic mission in Iran was supposed to be assisted by the Persian Cossack Brigade and the Orthodox Church. In reality, the relations between the Russian diplomats, Cossacks, and clergymen were far from harmonious. The Cossack Brigade, staffed by Iranian soldiers and mostly Russian officers, was regarded as the shah's personal guard and constituted the sole regular armed force in Iran. Even its efficiency was questionable due to a lack

³² Nikitine. *La Perse*. P. 90.

³³ Alexander Zarkeshev. *Ruskaia Pravoslavnaia Tserkov' v Persii-Irane, 1597–2001*. St. Petersburg, 2002. P. 117.

³⁴ He explained that "Russian Muslim subjects, who were often married to Persian women, intervened a lot into the country's life by extension of their parental links with the natives." Nikitine. *La Perse*. P. 72.

³⁵ For a similar argument, see Pirouz Mojtahed-Zadeh. *Small Players of the Great Game: The Settlement of Iran's Eastern Borderlands and the Creation of Afghanistan*. London; New York, 2004.

³⁶ Korostovets to Sazonov. May 5, 1915 // Foreign Policy Archive of the Russian Empire (AVPRI). F. 144. Op. 2/489. D. 287. L. 14.

of funding as well as deteriorating discipline.³⁷ The commander of the brigade directly cooperated with the Russian legation but, as a whole, the brigade did not function as a coordinated political factor.³⁸ Different Cossack units stationed in provinces and attached to consulates could be reassigned to participate in punitive expeditions from the territory of the Russian Empire across the border, or have nonofficial local allegiances and even be hired by individual officials. The church was an even more unpredictable ally. In Rasht, the consul was denounced by the local orthodox priest as a “pagan” and “Buddhist”; in Urmia, Father Sergii launched a crusade against the local Catholic missions without even informing the vice consulate; in Tehran, archimandrite Stefan was referred to by the Russian minister as a “hypocrite” and “formalist.”³⁹

The Russian government’s strategy of economic penetration in Iran also suffered from institutional miscoordination and uncontrollable exploits by local clients of the consuls. Iranian scouts of Russian capital were often either unrealistic about possibilities of investment in Iran, as was Armenian prince Amatuni,⁴⁰ or unreliable when it came to cooperation with the Russian legation, like Georgian entrepreneur Khoshtaria. After prolonged deliberations he was supported by the ministry only to be denounced soon as a traitor for his engagement with Georgian revolutionaries after 1917.⁴¹ Most Russian commercial enterprises in Iran were unprofitable, including the state-sponsored Discount Bank, the interests of which were promoted by the patronage of consuls. Economic performance and even political impact were not decisive factors in securing official support of Russian enterprises in Iran. According to Anatoly Neratov, the deputy foreign minister from 1910 to 1917, the decisive argument was that these enterprises were Russian.⁴² This caused Nikitine, the former Russian consul in Iran to assess the results of Russian economic intervention in Iran quite pessimistically: “I have rather the impression that we lost a lot of money.”⁴³

³⁷ Vladimir Kosogovskii. *Iz tegeranskogo dnevnika polkovnika Kosogovskogo*. Moscow, 1960; Nuzgar K. Ter-Oganov. *Persidskaia kazach’ia brigada, 1879–1921*. Moscow, 2012.

³⁸ Chirkin. *Dvadsat’ let sluzhby*. P. 63.

³⁹ Nikitine. *La Perse*. Pp. 61, 98. On the Franco-Russian conflict provoked by the proselytizing activities of Father Sergii in the Urmia region, see Aristide Châtelet. *Incidents de Khosrova, Perse, septembre 1911 à octobre 1913* // *The Historical Archives of the Lazarist Mission Congregation (AHCML)*. 136A.

⁴⁰ Chirkin. *Dvadsat’ let sluzhby*. P. 130.

⁴¹ Minorsky to Neratov. February 18, 1917 // *IVR*. F. 134. Op. 2. D. 313. L. 1; Nikitine. *La Perse*. P. 85.

⁴² Neratov to Minorsky, May 13, 1917 // *IVR*. F. 134. Op. 2. D. 313. L. 4.

⁴³ *Ibid.* P. 81.

Although reporting to the minister of foreign affairs, Russian consuls in Iran had to align their activities with other government agencies, particularly the governors of Russian borderland regions (who reported to the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of War, or the emperor himself). Viceroy of the Caucasus Illarion Vorontsov-Dashkov and the succeeding governors-general of Turkestan had the most influence over consuls in Iran, although their authority was nominally confined to the borders of the Russian Empire. On the other hand, Russian diplomats could rely on the military and moral support of these powerful administrators in case of a conflict with locals or even the legation in Tehran. In the context of systematic raids of nomadic tribes and intensified Ottoman encroachments on Iranian territory, Russian representatives often intervened in negotiations with the aggressors on behalf of the Iranian central authorities, while being backed by the real force of Russian governors.⁴⁴ This cooperation was all the more important given that the Russian border with Iran was porous and poorly protected, while control over the Iranian border with the Ottoman Empire barely existed.⁴⁵ Viceroy Vorontsov-Dashkov saw stability in the Iranian transborder provinces as intrinsic to the security of the Russian Transcaucasia under his rule. Therefore, he ardently protested military intervention in Iran and even hesitated to apply harsh anti-guerrilla measures toward Armenian revolutionaries (for which he was criticized by Russian nationalists and personally by Stolypin).⁴⁶ At the same time, he did not hesitate to conduct police expeditions against Iranian subjects raiding the

⁴⁴ Russian-Ottoman tensions in Iran during the prewar period are traditionally viewed as a prelude to the open military confrontation. See: Michael A. Reynolds. *Shattering Empires: The Clash and Collapse of the Russian and Ottoman Empires, 1908–1918*. Cambridge; New York, 2011; Sean McMeekin. *The Russian Origins of the First World War*. Cambridge; London, 2011. In practice, most border skirmishes, much discussed on the ministerial level, were provoked by the careless initiatives of local uncontrolled power figures.

⁴⁵ “Constantly in pursuit of profiteers, our border officers do their best to stop Iranian smugglers but give little concern to keeping good relations with the Iranians. Many customs officers, notably in Belosavar and Astara, have informed me about theft disguised as fighting against smuggling. It would be unjust to blame the border guards for this disarray: it is rather the misguided position of our authorities in Tiflis that led to the deterioration of the frontier situation.” Olfer’ev to Gartvig. April 30, 1908 // Russian State Historical Archive (RGIA). F. 1276. Op. 3. D. 697. L. 107–112. For a comparative characteristic discussion of the situation along Iranian borders, see Alfred Rieber. *Changing Concepts and Constructions of Frontiers: A Comparative Approach* // *Ab Imperio*. 2003. No. 1. P. 31.

⁴⁶ One of the most ardent opponents of Vorontsov-Dashkov’s policies was the leader of Russian nationalists in the Duma, Vladimir Purishkevich. See Deliara Ismailzade. *Graf I. I. Vorontsov-Dashkov. Namestnik Kavkazskii*. Moscow, 2005. Pp. 137–140.

Russian territory, regardless of possible foreign policy complications (such as the 1908 Dyman expedition that provoked a diplomatic scandal between St. Petersburg and Tehran).⁴⁷ Turkestan's governor-general in 1909–1914, Aleksandr Samsonov, also enjoyed significant autonomy in his actions and favored preventive measures at the southern frontier. In an atmosphere of rising Turkophobia and Islamophobia among the Russian administration, a paranoid fear of British and Ottoman spies compelled Samsonov to watch closely over the neighboring Iranian province of Khorasan.⁴⁸

As much as these structural circumstances affected the work of consular officers, of no lesser importance was the psychological atmosphere in the Russian colony in Iran during the pre-1917 decade. Just several years earlier, the foreign minister Vladimir Lamzdorf was arrogantly formulating Russia's policy toward Iran as essentially a dependent semi-colony,⁴⁹ but the Revolution of 1905 and defeat in the Russo-Japanese War dealt a blow to Russian international ambitions. Frustrated Russian diplomats developed an inferiority complex and fear of any form of popular dissent,⁵⁰ as well as of repudiation of a militant stance in the international competition, which could be interpreted as a sign of weakness. Thus, Russia's passive response to the Bosnian crisis of 1908–1909 was perceived as another humiliation of the country and its diplomacy, but even the signing of the 1907 Anglo-Russian accord earlier provoked discontent and even tacit sabotage among the regional and high-ranking diplomatic personnel.⁵¹ As a result, the rivalry between the Russian and British Empires in Iran persisted on the consular level, taking the form of symbolic demonstrations (from the decor of the

⁴⁷ Vorontsov-Dashkov to Stolypin. May 5, 1908 // RGIA. F. 1276. Op. 3. D. 697. L. 83–4.

⁴⁸ Marshall. *The Russian General Staff*. Pp. 151, 161, 180; Daniel Brower. *Turkestan and the Fate of the Russian Empire*. London; New York, 2003. Pp. 106–107.

⁴⁹ Cf.: “The principal aim pursued by us ... through various ways and means during long years of our relations with Persia can be defined as follows: to preserve the integrity of the possessions of the Shah; without seeking for ourselves territorial acquisitions, without permitting the hegemony of a third power, gradually to subject Persia to our dominant influence, without violating, however, the external symbols of her independence or her domestic order. In other words, our task is to make Persia politically obedient and useful, i.e., a sufficiently powerful instrument in our hands.” *Tsarskaia Rossia i Persia v épokhu russko-iaponskoi voiny* // *Krasnyi arkhiv*. 1932. No. 4. P. 14.

⁵⁰ “We were fighting the revolutionary spirit in Persia just as we had done in the Caucasus”. Nikitine. *La Perse*, P. 63.

⁵¹ “We have signed an accord, but the entire consular staff, [both] Russian and English, remained the same as before, and it was up to them to apply the new principles in which they did not believe, as these [principles] were constantly contradicted by the mundane reality.” *Ibid.* P. 79.

consulate building to the dress of consuls),⁵² personal conflicts between the diplomats of the two countries, and the precarious use of double agents.⁵³ Even more than the alleged British triumph in the Great Game, Russian diplomats dreaded Ottoman expansion in Iran that was broadening after 1908. All these elements nurtured an atmosphere of insecurity and suppressed belligerence. The endemic miscoordination of efforts by different consular offices (which the British minister Sir George Barclay dubbed in 1912 as the “‘orgy of indiscipline’ among Russian consular officers”) did not add confidence to Russian consuls.⁵⁴

It was in this troubled context of multilayered divides that, responding to the double pressure of the Iranian constitutional movement and Russia’s ailing international prestige, the Russian consular staff consolidated to oppose everyone: the Iranian “other,” the Britons, and even their own superiors in St. Petersburg. The Russian military intervention in 1911–1912, to a large degree brought about by the concerted efforts of Consul-General Ivan Pokhitonov in Tehran, Consul Andrei Miller in Tabriz, and Consul Aristid Dabizha in Mashhad, became the ultimate manifestation of unanimity of Russian diplomats in Iran, their different social and occupational backgrounds notwithstanding.⁵⁵ They discerned even more mutual commonality after encountering the new (“transitional” in Volkov’s terms) generation of trained diplomats,⁵⁶ who were critical of old Russian foreign policy methods and had to deal with liberal-minded plenipotentiary ministers, such as Stanislas Poklewski-Koziell (1909–1913) or Nikolai von Etter (1916–1917). As “old-school” diplomats, they saw their mission in preserving the traditional order in the name of Russia’s prestige.

Russian Perceptions of the Iranian Constitutional Movement

With the promulgation of the first Iranian constitution in 1906 and the accession of Crown Prince Mohammad ‘Ali to the Qajar throne in January 1907, growing tensions between the new shah and the constitutionalist op-

⁵² Russian diplomats in Iran favored the Cossack uniform, and this “oriental” attire presumably added them sympathies of Iranians. *Ibid.* P. 94.

⁵³ See A. M. Matveev. *Rol’ angliiskoi provokatsii v meshkhedskikh sobytiakh kontsa 1911 i nachala 1912 goda* // *Trudy sredneaziatskogo Universiteta*. 1954. Vol. 57. Pp. 133–61.

⁵⁴ Barclay to Grey, January 14, 1912 // The National Archives (TNA). IOR. L. PS. 11. 2.

⁵⁵ In terms of their social background, Pokhitonov was a former army officer, Miller was a physician, and Dabizha was a member of aristocracy.

⁵⁶ Among the liberally minded diplomats, Volkov cites Minorsky, Bravin, Vvedenskii. We can also add Nikitine, Chirkin, and Beliaev.

position created a general atmosphere of political instability. The Russian government first adopted a wait-and-see strategy and appointed a new minister to Tehran, Nicholas Hartwig (Nikolai Gartvig), tasked with modernizing the Russian legation. He was soon called away because of his dubious role in the anticonstitutionalist coup staged in July 1908 by Mohammad ‘Ali Shah and the Cossack Brigade’s commander, colonel Vladimir Liakhov. Although there is no evidence that Hartwig coordinated the actions of the Cossack Brigade, it is highly probable that he was informed about the shah’s plan because of his frequent contacts with Liakhov and the shah’s confidant Seraia Shapshal. Despite the scandal, Hartwig remained the Russian government’s main expert on the Iranian revolution,⁵⁷ which he condemned as a series of popular disorders inspired by corrupt elites:

At the beginning of 1906 Persia was shaken by large popular unrest that was looked upon as the awakening of the Persian people’s consciousness, and as its desire to overthrow the yoke of oppression and acquire the right to political participation. In reality, this was not the case. This movement emerged as a protest against the policies of the shah’s favorite, cruel and venal Prince Ein ed-Doule after his becoming prime minister. The manifestations were inspired by the clergy, displeased with the prince who did not want to share his bribes with them. ... Being in agony due to his illness, the shah [Mozaffar al-Din], who had neither money nor army to resist, did not have any other choice but to sign the demand for a constitution.⁵⁸

Hartwig’s claim of the existence of hidden forces guiding the revolutionary movement was based on his observations of the shah’s court with its omnipresent atmosphere of mutual suspicion and rivalry. But it was also a projection onto the Iranian society of a discourse on the Russian Revolution that was popular among Russian conservatives and nationalists. Hartwig’s colleague Nikitine similarly described the events of 1905 in Russia as a stage dominated by actors “who probably were unaware of the strings by which they were pulled and thus performed their roles with utter enthusiasm.”⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Hartwig participated in meetings of the Council of Ministers. See Dominic Lieven. *Towards the Flame: Empire, War and the End of Tsarist Russia*. London, 2015. P. 216. For different takes on the role played by Hartwig in the events of July 1908, see: Peter Avery. *Modern Persia*. London, 1965. P.134; Vanessa Martin. *Hartwig and Russian Policy in Persia, 1906–1908 // Middle Eastern Studies*. 1993. Vol. 29. P. 18; Kazemzadeh. *Russia and Britain*. Pp. 521–522.

⁵⁸ Gartvig. *Zapiska o persidskikh delakh rossiiskogo poslannika v Tegerane*, December 1908 // RGIA. F. 1276. Op. 3. D. 697. L. 348.

⁵⁹ Nikitine. *La Perse*. P. 34.

Whereas St. Petersburg conservative circles perceived the Iranian constitutional movement as a second edition of the Revolution of 1905, the liberal leadership of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not share Hartwig's unconditional support of the shah and recognized the legitimacy of the new constitutional regime. Hartwig, and the ardent opponent of the foreign minister, count Alexander Izvolsky, was replaced in Tehran by Evgenii Sablin. He was little versed in Iranian culture and politics but was expected to help Izvolsky sustain partner relationships with the British in Iran. However, Sablin immediately began to pressure Izvolsky for military intervention, reproducing a familiar view of Iran as a battleground between the proxies of the Russians and the British – ruling Mohammad 'Ali Shah versus influential prince Zill al-Soltan, respectively. This binary worldview interpreted the constitutional movement as a product of British intrigue.⁶⁰ The eruption of revolutionary events in Isfahan in 1909, when the Bakhtiari tribes toppled Governor Zill al-Soltan and marched on Tehran, made Sablin even more militant:

As long as Sattar Khan and Baker Khan are resting in Tabriz while the fedais are escaping punishment for shelling our consulate for the second time on June 6, as long as Turkish agents are inciting the population against Russia, as long as our commercial interests along the Anzali–Qazvin road are threatened and the Bakhtiari are heading to Tehran, our troops should stay. The departure of a large number of our armed forces will be interpreted by our enemies as a concession to Iranian revolutionaries, as a concession to Turkey, and may be even as fear of the Bakhtiari.⁶¹

Meanwhile in Tabriz – the new center of constitutionalist resistance, besieged by royalist troops – Russian consul Aleksandr Miller was composing daily reports to Izvolsky, in which he denounced the leaders of the constitutionalists as bandits and tyrants: “In fact, it all comes down to the terrorist reign of a small oligarchy, made up of the above-mentioned individuals [Sattar Khan, Baqer Khan, ‘Ali Kerbela’i], keeping the population of Tabriz in

⁶⁰ Heidi Walcher. *In the Shadow of the King: Zill al-Sultān and Isfahān under the Qājārs*. London, 2008. Pp. 340–341.

⁶¹ Sablin went so far in his fantastic interpretation of the events that he even accused the famous British orientalist Edward Browne of spying for Germany in Iran: Sablin, June 11, 1909 // RGIA. F. 1276. Op. 3. D. 697. L. 315. On Browne's relations with the Iranian constitutionalists, see Mansur Bonakdarian. *Edward G. Browne and the Iranian Constitutional Struggle: From Academic Orientalism to Political Activism* // *Iranian Studies*. 1993. Vol. 26. Pp. 7–31.

total obedience and assisted by our Caucasian subjects – Georgians, Tatars, and Armenians.”⁶² The news about contacts between Baku-based Iranian constitutionalists and the Ottoman minister in Tehran, as well as the request for mediation coming from the revolutionary committee of Tabriz to the Ottoman representative Nasrukhi Bei added fuel to the Russian fears of Ottoman expansionism.⁶³ After Russian troops took Tabriz under their control in April 1909, the presence of constitutionalist leaders in the city ceased to be an Iranian domestic problem and was perceived as a challenge to Russian military prestige. Enraged by the declaration of Ottoman protection of Sattar Khan, Miller insisted on the need to at least expel him from the city: “After we leave Azerbaijan, the presence of Sattar Khan ... will be of no importance to us, but while our troops are in Tabriz, Sattar Khan ... must go.”⁶⁴

Miller did not conceal his contempt for all categories of Iranian elites as incapable of sustaining a rational social order. In his eyes, this justified the Russian civilizing mission aimed at protecting the constitution and maintaining peace, despite the destructive attitude of fanatic religious leaders and selfish princes and governors:

Preparations for the departure of a part of our troops from Tabriz to the Caucasus were interpreted by local Iranian authorities, fedais, and inhabitants of Tabriz in a typically Iranian style: the governor-general and the *kargozar* attributed the departure of “practically all Russian troops” to the success of their cunning politics; the fedais and fanatic revolutionary preachers announced that the Russians were afraid of them and promised to get rid of all reactionaries;⁶⁵ the local population was scared by the atrocities of the fedais and their puppet ... [the governor of Tabriz]. Certainly, the fedais and politicized mullahs do not want to acknowledge the pacific mission of our troops in Tabriz who defend the Iranian constitution as well as the life and property of ordinary Iranians. The majority of the population, merchants and artisans, are well aware of all the good that Russia does for them but they are afraid of the armed minority and do not dare to openly thank the men of general Snarskii.⁶⁶

⁶² Genis. Vitse-konsul Vvedenskii. P. 8.

⁶³ Gartvig, September 28, 1908 // RGIA. F. 1276. Op. 3. D. 697. L. 234.

⁶⁴ Miller, May 27, 1909 // RGIA. F. 1276. Op. 3. D. 698. L. 250.

⁶⁵ On the perception of Islam in late imperial Russia, see Robert Geraci. Kul'turnaia sud'ba imperii pod voprosom: musul'manskii Vostok v rossiiskoi etnografii XIX veka // Ilya Gerasimov et al. (Eds.). Novaia imperskaia istoriia. Pp. 271–306; Joerg Baberovsky. Tsvivilizatorskaia missia i natsionalizm v Zakavkaz'e: 1828–1914 gg. // Ibid. Pp. 307–352.

⁶⁶ Miller. October 2, 1909 // RGIA. F. 1276. Op. 3. D. 699. L. 135.

The Iranian pro-constitutionalist clergy became Miller's favorite target for criticism. A professional physician by training, Miller had even a vaguer idea of the specifics of Iranian Islam than did his fellow diplomats and expressed a deep prejudice against Muslim religious authorities. His staunch anticlerical sentiment would lead him to order the execution of the eminent pro-constitutionalist cleric Thiqat al-Islam in 1911, during the bloody Iranian–Russian conflict in Azerbaijan. Back in 1909 he was reporting that “as Sattar [Khan] shared the booty with Sikket-ul’-Islam, this cleric is well known to the population not only of Tabriz but also of all Azerbaijan under the sobriquet ‘Sirket ul’-Islam,’ which means the ‘theft of Islam.’”⁶⁷

Thus, during the early stage of the Iranian constitutional movement, the narrative that formed in the reports of Russian diplomats on the ground took over the upper echelons of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and then went on to dominate Russian public opinion. According to this view, Iranian constitutionalists were nothing but puppets manipulated by corrupt elites, agents of influence of the British and Ottomans, or simply a bunch of bandits and religious fanatics. At this point, the theme of the constitutionalists' threat to Russia's political and economic domination in the region was overshadowed by the excitement over Russia's civilizing mission in the Orient, its international prestige, and the humane approach to the “restoration of order” by Russian troops. Though alternative assessments of the situation in Iran were occasionally voiced in the press (notably in the liberal newspaper *Rech*'), mainstream public opinion embraced the official narrative. The public endorsed the idea of interfering in Iran and even blamed the Russian government for its indecisiveness when Russian interests were at stake.⁶⁸

Mediation and patronage

The nationalist and democratic nature of the constitutionalist movement presented a threat not only to the Qajar dynasty backed by Russia but also to the material well-being of Russia's numerous Iranian clients – princes, powerful administrators, and tribal chieftains. Russians protected their interests in exchange for certain services. In practice, this system of quid pro quo was unreliable, marred by frequent breaches of loyalty, undelivered promises or abused trust (when some protégés of Russian officials engaged in illegal activities using the protection of their patrons). Nevertheless, the mere scope of such contacts ensured Russia's visible presence on the Iranian

⁶⁷ Genis. *Vitse-konsul Vvedenskii*. P. 336.

⁶⁸ Siegel. *Endgame*. P. 118.

political scene, so when they weighed the general vector of policy in Iran, Russian authorities were inclined to protect their clients. Thus, despite his universally acknowledged incompetence,⁶⁹ Mohammad ‘Ali Shah enjoyed continuous support and assistance from the Russian government even after his abdication in 1909. His attempt to regain power in 1911 was not objected to by Russians because of their belief in the ex-shah’s loyalty rather than in his ability to control the country.

The same pragmatic approach bordering on cynicism characterized the attitude of Russian diplomats to their less prominent agents of influence. For instance, the Shahseven tribal chief Rahim Khan, notorious for his regular bandit raids, was a henchman of Mohammad ‘Ali Shah, and switched allegiance to Russians after the shah’s demise. Russian officials protected him from persecution in Iran after his assurances of unconditional loyalty. Characteristically, the fate of this Iranian subject was decided by Russian administrators outside Iran. Thus, the viceroy of the Caucasus Vorontsov-Dashkov was enthusiastic about seeing Rahim Khan on Russian soil: “Two agents of the Turkish sultan proposed to Rahim Khan that he accept the Ottoman patronage, but he refused saying, ‘To become Russian or to die!’ I think we should promise Rahim Khan that Russia will not interfere in Iran but will be ready to welcome him personally with his family.”⁷⁰

Prime minister Stolypin supported the idea as a demonstration of Russia’s commitment to loyal clients abroad, regardless of their previous record: “The expulsion of those who have found refuge in our country and who were practically on our territory is extremely undesirable because only death awaits them in Iran. This is incompatible with our morale.”⁷¹

Considerations of imperial prestige complemented political and economic pragmatism, as the initial establishing of client-patron relationships implied the genuine interest of Russian private capital and even more so, of local consular officers. Thus, appointed the governor of Tabriz in 1912 on the initiative of Russians, Shoja‘ al-Dowleh was known for “enrichment of certain Russian subjects and oppression of entire villages.”⁷² This suggests that Shoja‘ al-Dowleh’s zealous persecution of constitutionalists was no less important a factor for his promotion as his ability to benefit his Russian partners financially.

⁶⁹ See Nuzgar Ter-Oganov. *Bol’shoi anglo-russkii kompromiss 1907 g. i sverzhenie Mokhammad Ali-shakha Kadzhara* // *Voennyi sbornik*. 2015. Vol. 9. Pp. 158–178.

⁷⁰ Vorontsov-Dashkov to Stolypin, January 15, 1910 // RGIA. F. 1276. Op. 3. D. 700. L. 31.

⁷¹ Stolypin to Vorontsov-Dashkov, January 23, 1910 // *Ibid.* L. 38.

⁷² Genis. *Vitse-konsul Vvedenskii*. P. 12.

Whereas economic pragmatism usually implied corruption of Russian government officials, sticking to the irrational argument of imperial prestige could be even more damaging. The commitment to secure the immunity of another Russian client, against all odds, the brother of the former shah, Sho‘a‘ al-Saltaneh, became a decisive factor in staging the large-scale military intervention in 1911. The attempt of the Iranian government to confiscate the estates of Sho‘a‘ al-Saltaneh led to a conflict between the acting Russian minister in Tehran and Consul-General Ivan Pokhitonov, who insisted in his reports on the necessity to restore Russian dignity in the face of such a direct assault.⁷³ The Russian government sided with Pokhitonov, which, rather than saving empire’s dignity, only added insult to injury.⁷⁴ Besides the heavy consequences of the 1911 intervention, it was discovered that Sho‘a‘ al-Saltaneh had double allegiance to the Russian and Ottoman legations. As a prominent Russian orientalist and diplomat, Vladimir Minorsky, noted retrospectively,

Bold and inexorable, prince Shoa as-Saltane... is responsible for the incident of 1911 that led to our ultimatum, military intervention, etc. We must not forget that Shoa as-Saltane was openly under Turkish protection and that the Iranian Cossacks ... were sent to the prince’s house upon request of the Turkish consul! Our patience with Shoa as-Saltane, whom we continue to consider as our ally, is genuinely surprising.⁷⁵

Even more embarrassing for the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was the support by its Iranian agents of Yusuf Khan Herati, who became indirectly responsible for the bombardment of Imam Reza shrine by Russian troops in Mashhad in April 1912.⁷⁶ Yusuf Khan was a longtime protégé of Russian consul Dabizha since a long time, but soon after the Russian intervention in 1911 was declared a British spy.⁷⁷ Whether Yusuf Khan coluded with the British or not, his defection sparked a conflict between the

⁷³ Barclay to Grey. Annual Report on Iran 1911. Doc. 39 // K. Bourne et al. (Eds.). *British Documents on Foreign Affairs: The Near and Middle East, 1856–1914*. Vol. 13–14. Frederick, MD, 1985. P. 206; Morgan Shuster. *The Strangling of Persia*. New York, 1912. P. 151.

⁷⁴ Kazemzadeh. *Russia and Britain*. P. 634.

⁷⁵ Minorsky to Sazonov, March 1917 // IVR. F. 154. Op. 2. D. 205. L. 9.

⁷⁶ See Rudi Mathee. *Infidel Aggression: The Russian Assault on the Holy Shrine of Imam Reza, Mashhad, 1912* // Rudi Mathee and Elena Andreeva (Eds.). *Russians in Iran*. London; New York, 2018. Pp. 136–69.

⁷⁷ The argument is made in Matveev. *Rol’ angliiskoi provokatsii*.

minister of foreign affairs Sergei Sazonov and the ambassador in Tehran Stanislas Poklewski-Koziell. The back and forth between them revealed the meaninglessness and counterproductivity of the very notion of “imperial prestige.” Poklewski-Koziell asked the ministry to call out consul Dabizha, pointing not to the fact that he was compromised by his agent but to the claim of Percy Sykes, the British consul in Mashhad, that Dabizha was mentally ill. To him, this put a stain on Russia’s reputation and thus necessitated the removal of Dabizha.⁷⁸ Sazonov retorted that Sykes was himself an alcoholic and that calling out Dabizha (together with Pokhitonov) would lead to the demise of Russian prestige.⁷⁹ Thus, the ministry’s fear of losing face paralyzed its ability to acknowledge the mistakes of consular workers on the ground, root out the nefarious culture of clientelism, and avoid the danger of making government policy a hostage to murky quid pro quo dealings.

Agency and decision making

The decision to invade Iran had been forming in St. Petersburg gradually. Initially, requests for military support coming from consulates in Isfahan, Rasht, and Tabriz were not given much consideration by the government and senior military and civil officials.⁸⁰ The idea of sending an army abroad was vehemently opposed by the head of General Staff Fëdor Palitsyn, who expected an escalation of the Iranian population’s hostility toward the Russian troops in case of a full-scale invasion. Vorontsov-Dashkov did not want to provoke the Ottomans by upsetting the strategic balance in the region.⁸¹ The small-scale intervention of the Russian army in April 1909 was fashioned as a humanitarian operation aimed at lifting the siege of Tabriz. Back then, Foreign Minister Izvolsky still believed in the possibility of resolving the internal strife in Iran after the promulgation of a new electoral law.⁸²

Izvolsky announced that the 1909 expedition to Tabriz was a mere demonstration of force on the Iranian–Ottoman border and not an act of hostility toward the Iranian government.⁸³ Yet, even as an anti-Ottoman gesture, the

⁷⁸ Poklevski to Sazonov, February 20, March 24, 1912 // AVPRI. F. 144. Op. 2/489. D. 1046. L. 1, 5.

⁷⁹ Sazonov to Poklevskii, February 21, March 29, 1912 // Ibid. L. 4, 6.

⁸⁰ The Journal of the Council of Ministers. October 3, 1908 // RGIA. F. 1276. Op. 3. D. 697. L. 248.

⁸¹ Vorontsov-Dashkov, April 25, 1909 // Ibid. D. 698. L. 166.

⁸² The Journal of the Council of Ministers. L. 251.

⁸³ As Stolypin put it, “The insignificance of this measure will be the best proof of our pacifist intentions.” Ibid.

arrival of several battalions with two dozen canons in Northern Iran was a far cry from the demands of Russian consuls. According to Miller's reports, the revolutionaries in Iranian Azerbaijan were backed by the Ottoman consul, who was distributing Ottoman flags and calling for the population of Tabriz to close the city market.⁸⁴ Sablin denounced the "intrigues" of the Ottoman consul in Tehran.⁸⁵ At the same, the Ottoman minister complained to a correspondent of *Russkoe Slovo* that "the conclusion of the Anglo-Russian Accord in 1907 without consulting Ottoman authorities was a big mistake."⁸⁶ Despite this mounting pressure, the Russian government had concluded that the incomplete military reform in the Ottoman Empire and its political problems in Albania and Yemen would make the Ottoman threat infeasible in the near future. It was found sufficient to reinforce the Iranian Cossack Brigade rather than sending Russian troops to the Ottoman border.⁸⁷

When the situation in Iran escalated in 1909 and the authority of Mohammad 'Ali Shah was threatened by the advance toward the capital of revolting Bakhtiari tribes, Izvolsky ordered troops to gather in Baku and the media to extensively cover his decision: he hoped that this demonstration of force alone would stop the Bakhtiari and avoid the intervention.⁸⁸ The order for the troops to cross the border and march to Rasht was given only in late June by Stolypin, who had been monitoring the news from Tehran until the last moment.⁸⁹ Russian troops reached Qazvin, halfway to Tehran, just two days before the Bakhtiari entered the capital and five days before the abdication of Mohammad 'Ali Shah. Without a firm position on the Iranian question in St. Petersburg, one Russian battalion stayed in Qazvin until World War I without clear instructions. Never seeing action, it had lost much of its personnel to the epidemic of typhoid.⁹⁰

As the new Iranian government started showing its independence, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs accused Tehran of indulging the Iranian nationalists in their attacks on Russian enterprises.⁹¹ The new minister of

⁸⁴ Miller, May 19, 1909 // RGIA. F. 1276. Op. 3. D. 698. L. 230.

⁸⁵ Sablin, May 21, 1909 // Ibid. L. 235.

⁸⁶ Miller, May 21, 1909 // Ibid. L. 232.

⁸⁷ See the journal of the meeting of the General Staff members with representatives of the foreign ministry on March 1, 1911 in Ibid. D. 700. L. 466.

⁸⁸ Sazonov to Stolypin, June 13, 1909 // D. 698. L. 318–9.

⁸⁹ Sukhomlinov to Stolypin, June 22, 1909 // Ibid. L. 381.

⁹⁰ The General Staff of the Caucasian military district to colonel Aver'ianov, January 19, 1910 // Ibid. D. 700. L. 111.

⁹¹ Poklewski-Koziell to Izvolsky, February 15, 1910 // Ibid. L. 71.

foreign affairs, Sergei Sazonov, pledged to “put an end to the situation in which not only Russian interests are questioned but also our reputation and allure [*obaianie*]”.⁹² Once again, the political problem of Iran’s slipping out of Russia’s imperial control was fashioned as “unjust attacks on Russia’s name.” Sazonov announced a three-stage plan of sanctions that envisioned protests to Iranian diplomatic representatives as the first stage, and an ultimatum to the Iranian government as a final resort.⁹³

Russia perceived the activities of American financial adviser to the Iranian parliament, William Morgan Shuster, as the final blow to imperial prestige. Pursuing the task of stabilizing Iran’s financial situation, Shuster pursued royal family members whose enormous debts contributed to the national deficit. In October 1911 he moved on to fulfill the government’s decision to confiscate the estates of the shah’s brother Sho‘a‘ al-Saltaneh, who happened to be a senior client of the Russian mission in Iran. An economic measure objectively leading to the diminishing of Iran’s political dependence on Russia was interpreted as an injury to imperial prestige in St. Petersburg. In a matter of days, an ultimatum was issued and 4,000 Russian troops arrived.

This nervous reaction and the very haste in which the decision to begin a military intervention in Iran was made reveal the state of mind of Russia’s political elite. During the Iranian–Russian negotiations that followed soon after the assassination of Stolypin, the deputy minister of foreign affairs, Anatoly Neratov, admitted that he had received “the highest instructions” to send troops to Iran, which probably meant receiving an order from Nicolas II.⁹⁴ Thus, the mindset of Russian “old guard” consular officers in Iran, shaped by the culture of corruption and crude imperialism, had eventually triumphed in St. Petersburg. Despite the shift in Russian foreign policy toward a more balanced and less aggressive posture under Izvolsky, a particular interpretation of events in Iran became part and parcel of the local expertise provided by consuls to St. Petersburg – the main source of

⁹² Sazonov to Poklewski-Koziell, September 25, 1910 // *Ibid.* L. 270. Izvolsky had earlier made a similar statement during the Moroccan crisis in 1905, fearing that by making diplomatic concessions Russia would “cease to be [the] Russia of Peter the Great.” Dietrich Geyer. *Russian Imperialism: The Interaction of Domestic and Foreign Policy.* New Haven, 1987. P. 120.

⁹³ Sazonov argued, “I think that Iran needs us more than we need them... Of course, we should avoid resorting to drastic measures, but I believe that it will not be necessary and that the Iranian obstinacy will be broken before our sanctions are exhausted.” Sazonov to Poklewski-Koziell, September 25, 1910 // *RGIA.* F. 1276. Op. 3. D. 700. L. 270.

⁹⁴ Stolypin’s death delayed the Iran–Russian negotiations. Matveev. *Sotsial’no-politicheskaia bor’ba.* P. 134.

information for the Russian government. In the absence of a clear policy toward a new, constitutional Iran, Russian authorities became susceptible to the hidden message of consular reports.

Another reason for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to forfeit the liberal course of foreign policy advocated by Izvolsky when it came to Iran was the inability to perceive this country as an independent nation. Apparently, on the mental map of the Russian authorities, Iran belonged to colonial “Asia” as a gradient of dependency forms, ranging from Russia’s internal provinces in Transcaucasia, through colonial Turkestan, to Iran as a nominally sovereign satellite. This explains the exceptional role played by administrators of Russia’s borderland regions in shaping the empire’s Iranian policy. Thus, Turkestan’s governor-general, Alexander Samsonov, who perceived Iran through the prism of his experience as a colonial administrator, supported the use of military force on Iranian territory (particularly in Mashhad located not far from the border with Turkestan). He believed that any concession to Iranian authorities “will be interpreted by barbarous Persians as our weakness and will be used secretly by the British.”⁹⁵ On the opposite, western segment of Russia’s border with Iran, the viceroy of the Caucasus Vorontsov-Dashkov also did not view Iran outside the context of security of the Russian territory under his rule. He welcomed the return of “clarity” into Russian foreign policy after the intervention.⁹⁶

Thus, strategic concerns over British and Ottoman global influences in the region, the doctrine of economic imperialism, contempt for revolutionaries in the wake of Russia’s own 1905 revolution, obsession with ailing imperial prestige, and pressure from rising Russian nationalism together brought about the 1911 Russian intervention in Iran. These structural preconditions by themselves, however, cannot explain the historical dynamics and timing of concrete political steps. This is where the agency of Russian consuls in Iran comes to the fore. Intellectual outlook, political preferences, and economic interests played a no less important role than the fundamental factors outlined above. Integrated in the local society and tied to the Qajar regime through multiple personal connections with their extensive clientele, Russian consuls were as much representatives of the Russian Empire as members of the multifaceted Iranian upper class. Therefore, they perceived the rise of the Iranian constitutional movement not just as foreign observers

⁹⁵ Samsonov to Sazonov, June 10, 1912 // AVPRI. F. 144. Op. 2/489. D. 324. L. 149–50.

⁹⁶ Vorontsov-Dashkov to Nicolas II, February 15, 1912 // RGIA. F. 1276. Op. 3. D. 702. L. 187–8.

but also as participants in the ruling class, whose personal reputation if not well-being was at stake now. It was their sensibilities and vested interests that informed and shaped Russian foreign policy toward Iran, particularly during the final stages of the Iranian Revolution. The boundary between foreign and domestic policies, military intervention and police operations, war and revolution was so blurred in Russian-Iranian relationships in the early 1910s not least because the self-perception of Russian consuls in Iran was ambiguous.

SUMMARY

This article examines the attitude adopted by Russian government officials and diplomats toward the Iranian constitutional movement in 1907–1912. Framed by the discourse of international prestige, it was shaped by fundamental factors such as foreign policy and domestic security concerns, imperialism, and orientalism. Of no less importance was the role of Russian diplomats in Iran. They had developed and sustained a wide network of political clients who were supposed to act as agents of Russian influence in the country, ranging from local chieftains to members of the ruling dynasty. At some point, the commitment of numerous Russian consular officers in Iran to their clients outweighed pragmatism, and instead of building relationships with the revolutionary government, they began lobbying for Russia's military intervention in support of counterrevolutionary forces. Depending on information coming from the field officers in Iran and obsessed with the notion of imperial prestige and contempt for revolution, the Russian government eventually gave in to this pressure.

РЕЗЮМЕ

В статье рассматривается отношение российских правительственных чиновников и дипломатов к иранскому конституционному движению 1907–1912 гг. Риторически российская дипломатия апеллировала к международному престижу, но реально на отношение имперских властей влияли империалистическая политика и ориенталистские взгляды, а также практические соображения внешней политики и внутренней безопасности. Не меньшую роль играли связи российских дипломатов в Иране, культивировавших широкую сеть политической клиентуры. В эту сеть агентов российского влияния в стране входили как местные

племенные лидеры, так и члены правящей династии. В определенный момент лояльность многочисленных российских консульских чиновников их клиентам перевесила прагматизм, и вместо налаживания отношений с революционным правительством они начали лоббировать российскую военную интервенцию в поддержку контрреволюционных сил. Российские власти, чрезвычайно серьезно относившиеся к понятию имперского престижа и испытывавшие презрение к революции, зависели от информации, поступавшей от их представителей в Иране. В итоге они уступили их давлению.