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The wrath of God or national hero? Nader Shah in European and Iranian historiography

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Abstract

This article examines the way in which Iran's eighteenth-century ruler Nader Shah was portrayed in contemporary Europe as well as in Iran, and how the resulting image—half national hero, half ruthless warlord—has resonated until today. In an age short on 'great' leaders, Nader spoke to the imagination like no other contemporary ruler, Western or Asian. Nader's subsequent record can be read as a palimpsest, a layered series of images of multiple world conquerors, from Alexander to Napoleon. The latter, who shared Nader's humble background and evoked a similar ambivalence, represented the closest analogue, turning him into the European Nader Shah. In the modern West, Nader no longer speaks to the imagination. Modern Iranians, by contrast, have come to see him as the Iranian Napoleon. While still ambivalent about him, they admire him as the ruler who regenerated the nation and ended foreign occupation, yet his undeniable cruelty and imperialism make him an awkward national hero.

Keywords: Nader Shah; history; representation; Iran; Napoleon

Providence called forth an adventurer, a leader of thieves, to become the liberator of Persia, to recover its lost provinces from the foreigner

—Charles Picault, *Histoire des révolutions de Perse pendant la durée du dix-huitième siècle*, 1810, vol. ii, p. 38

The collapse of the Safavid state at the hand of a small band of Afghan insurgents in 1722 was as unexpected and dramatic as it was consequential. The fall of Isfahan unleashed a series of events that include the invasion of north-western Iran by Russian and Ottoman forces, the quick demise of Afghan rule, and the rise to power of a succession of mostly ephemeral warlords. In the process, large parts of the Iranian plateau suffered enormous bloodshed and extortion, resulting in widespread suffering and destitution. The long-term result of all this turmoil was that Iran and its inhabitants became isolated, largely disconnected from the wider world and certainly from developments in a rapidly changing Europe.

A hundred years earlier, at the height of the Safavid dynasty, Iran had been a proud country that derived its self-confidence from the very particularism that its status as the only Twelver-Shi'i state in the world conferred on it. It had reached its apogee of

power and wealth under Shah ‘Abbas I (r. 1587–1629), a ruler who, after regaining most of the lands lost to the Ottomans by his predecessors, had connected his country to the world in unprecedented ways. After proclaiming Isfahan his capital and endowing it with a newly designed awe-inspiring centre, ‘Abbas had turned this centrally located city into a nexus of land-based and maritime trade links between India and the Ottoman Empire. He had opened an outlet to oceanic trade by creating the port of Bandar ‘Abbas. After resettling a large group of Armenians in Isfahan, he had given these so-called New Julfans a monopoly on Iran’s most lucrative export commodity, raw silk. A decade later, keen to diversify his commercial options, Shah ‘Abbas had welcomed European merchants to Iran as well, giving the newly arrived English and Dutch East India companies the right to establish trading posts in his realm and to ply their trade via the newly emerging maritime routes circumventing the Ottoman Empire. Along with all other foreigners, the agents of these companies were seen and treated as representatives of subordinate, tributary lands.

To Europeans at that time, Safavid Iran was, if not the cynosure of the world, the legendary land of the Sophy, a term personified by the same Shah ‘Abbas ‘the Great’. Ever since his reign, European visitors—merchants and missionaries, adventurers and gentlemen scholars—had visited the country in large numbers, drawn to the realm of this visionary ruler as much by the business opportunities it offered as by stories about the safety of its roads, the comfort of its caravanserais, and, above all, by the reputed splendour of Isfahan, with its dazzling royal square surrounded by multiple manifestations of religious, commercial, and political power and energy: mosques, bazaars, and palaces.

All this (imagined) creativity and splendour had come crashing down with the demise of the Safavid state. Foreign as well as Persian-language sources speak of the horrors that accompanied the collapse, and the few Europeans who survived the ordeal echoed these, returning with tales of utter ruin and destruction. The once glorious city, home to at least 300,000 people in the mid-seventeenth century, fell into ruin, turning into a small desolate town of no more than 30,000, where jackals howled amid the ruins. What followed was a century of chaos and anarchy during which much of Iran, seemingly plunged into barbarism, became a dark and dangerous land run by warlords and mostly shunned by outsiders. As the world was radically reconfigured in the eighteenth century, Iranians, relatively isolated, continued to live in a rather self-congratulatory, inward-looking mode, secure in the knowledge that their country was the envy of the world.

Iran’s relative insularity was shattered in the early nineteenth century with the various resounding defeats the tribally organised and poorly disciplined Qajar armies suffered on the battlefield against the much better equipped Russians, people the Iranians had always dismissed as bibulous, thick-skulled barbarians.¹ As Russia occupied large swathes of Iran’s northern regions, Britain, now in possession of India, intruded from the other side (the Persian Gulf), initially to forestall French influence and soon to keep the Russians at bay. The representatives of these nations were no longer supplicants seeking concessions but commanding officers keen to establish commercial and, eventually, political hegemony in the region and able to impose their will on a hapless nation.

Iranians have been smarting from the loss of a self-evident sense of greatness ever since the reality of their developmental backwardness sank in. Underneath, the memory of being the centre of the world lingered, though, and wounded pride about unacknowledged greatness built up, turning, over time, into deep resentment. The undercurrents

¹ For this, see Rudi Matthee, ‘Facing a rude and barbarous neighbor: Iranian perceptions of Russia and the Russians from the Safavids to the Qajars’, in *Iran Facing Others: Identity Boundaries in a Historical Perspective*, (eds) Abbas Amanat and Farzin Vejdani (New York, 2012), pp. 99–124.

of this sentiment manifested themselves in the earliest travelogues of Iranians visiting Europe as a sense of ‘deficiency’, of a lag in technological progress. Later in the nineteenth century, as European descriptions of Iran began to influence Iranian self-perceptions, a sense of socio-political backwardness and even cultural inferiority crept in.² The emergence of modern nationalism, finally, ushered in a revalidation of Iranian culture and a gathering sense of wounded pride. From the late nineteenth century on, Iranians have been engaging with the world in deeply ambivalent ways, conscious of their subordinate status yet proudly mindful of their historical memory, increasingly so as it was revived by archaeological findings. ‘Ancient glory, present misery’, to use Partha Chatterjee’s term, has been the theme for Iranians as much as for Indians.³

Throughout Iranian history writing one finds elements of acute self-awareness and identity formation, much of it expressed as nostalgia by historians driven by a desire to ‘explain the loss of their civilization, and to protect and perhaps nurture its heritage for the future’. Not historical amnesia à la Hegel, but a suffocating surfeit of myth-inspired historical awareness has been the hallmark of Iran’s self-image. The narrative displacement that followed the confrontation of the Iranian tradition with the newly developed, more rigorous European methodology in the nineteenth century was cruel, Ali Ansari observes. Yet in the figure of Cyrus the ‘Great’, modern Iranian historians managed to find an avatar of the emancipatory optimism inherent in modern, Western-influenced historiography.⁴

Modern Iranians indeed have found the ultimate emblem of ancient glory in the person of Cyrus, turning this ancient ruler into the personification of justice and, even more anachronistically, the world’s ‘first’ human rights advocate. But Achaemenid times are the stuff of legend more than of history, and in their search for a more recent, better-documented ‘golden age’, Iranians have constructed the Safavid period as their *lieu de mémoire par excellence*. Just as the Germans in the Age of Romanticism had to leap centuries in their search for material that lent itself to the shaping of an inspiring, historically grounded national identity—finding this neither in the mirror of the foppish, French-dominated eighteenth century nor in the blood-soaked horrors of the seventeenth-century Thirty-Years’ War, but in the Middle Ages—so Iranians have come to look back at the Safavid period nostalgically, as the last time their country was proud, independent, and the envy of the world.

It has been much more difficult to weave the eighteenth century into a continuous national narrative of loss and regeneration through resilience, of foreign-inflicted defeat and phoenix-like resurgence. Modern Iranians have sought to do this by highlighting the stature of the two rulers who seem to provide some coherence in what is otherwise a rather inchoate period, Nader Shah and Karim Khan Zand, focusing on the role of the former as the brilliant warrior who ‘liberated’ his country from foreign control and restored its military might, and on the image of the latter as the ruler who cared for his subjects without advancing imperial claims, refusing to call himself shah.

This article considers how they have gone about this with respect to the former, Nader Shah, a warrior-king who paired unspeakable cruelty with unmistakable leadership qualities, who rid the Iranian plateau of foreign invaders only to set out on a bloody campaign to subdue India, who drove his own people to fiscal ruin yet brought such fabulous wealth back from the subcontinent that he could afford to proclaim a year-long tax remission at

² For this, see Monica Ringer, *Education, Religion, and the Discourse of Cultural Reform in Qajar Iran* (Costa Mesa, 2001).

³ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, 1993), p. 97.

⁴ Ali Ansari, ‘Myth, history and narrative displacement in Iranian historiography’, in *Perceptions of Iran. History, Myths and Nationalism from Medieval Persia to the Islamic Republic*, (ed.) Ali Ansari (London, 2014), p. 7.

home. The historical memory of Nader's record—part Oriental despot, part national icon—has a complex genealogy. The image of him that has come to us did not just emerge from either the written Persian-language sources or contemporary European accounts, but is a composite, the outcome of a dialogic engagement between two traditions that also came to include the warlord who would overshadow all previous warlords—Napoleon Bonaparte—who admired Nader Shah, became his European equivalent, and ended up inspiring Iranians to turn Nader into the Napoleon of Asia.

Nader Shah in Europe's eighteenth century

The portrayal of Nader Shah in the eighteenth-century West was the combined outcome of eyewitness accounts, Persian-language sources, and Enlightenment anxieties. Europeans, still puzzled by the sudden fall of the Safavids, learned of him at least half a decade before he took power in 1736 as the warrior who captured Isfahan from the Afghans in 1729. The immediacy of the reporting, new to the eighteenth century, is astonishing. Tahmasb Qoli Khan, as Nader Shah was still called at the time, appears in the European press and, via Istanbul, Vienna, and Moscow, even in American newspapers as early as 1730.⁵ The *Mercure de France* of November 1731 contained an 'eyewitness report' that portrayed Tahmasb Qoli Khan as a saviour, a man of valour and fidelity, brave and full of esprit.⁶ Louis-Sauveur Marquis de Villeneuve, French ambassador to the Ottoman Empire from 1728 to 1741, mentions him as early as the summer of 1732, and frequently thereafter.⁷ His stature as the dynamic warlord who might rescue his nation by liberating it from the barbarians who had invaded this old, sophisticated land—the Turks, the Mughals, and the Afghans—only grew with time. In 1738 a huge, 770-page tome appeared in Germany depicting Nader as the divinely inspired saviour of a collapsed nation.⁸ The notion of Nader the saviour resonated with the political philosophy of the Enlightenment as articulated by luminaries such as Montesquieu, Diderot, and Holbach, who distinguished between the legitimate right to defend and recover one's home country from illegitimate wars of conquest.⁹

Soon thereafter, with his defeat of the Mughal Emperor Mohammad Shah at Karnal in 1739 and his subsequent sack of Delhi, a rather different Nader burst onto the European scene. News of these exploits spread quickly, carried by Western missionaries and agents of the European maritime companies, and soon gave rise to numerous pamphlets and books.¹⁰ The earliest narrative about Nader's Indian adventure seems to have been written in 1739 by Dutch East India Company agents in Bengal. This report, published in Holland in 1740, may have been the source of the anonymous two-volume work that came out in Amsterdam a year later as *Histoire de Thamas Kouli-Kan Sophi de Perse*, a text that was

⁵ D. T. Potts (ed.), *Agreeable News from Persia. Iran in the Colonial and Early Republican American Press, 1712–1848* (Wiesbaden, 2022), pp. 185ff.

⁶ 'Mémoire historique sur la défaite des rebelles de Perse et l'élévation du Schah Thamas, par M. D. G. témoin oculaire', *Mercure de France* (Nov. 1731), pp. 2487–2516.

⁷ Sinan Kunalalp (ed.), *Les rapports de Louis-Sauver Marquis de Villeneuve ambassadeur du roi de France auprès de la Sublime Port Ottomane (1728–1741)*, vol. 2 (1732–1733) (Istanbul, 2020), pp. 131, 138, 151, 306, 310.

⁸ Pithander von der Quelle (David Fassmann), *Herkunft, Leben und Thaten, des persianischen Monarchens, Schach Nadyr, vormals Kuli-Chan genannt, samt historischen Erzählungen und Nachrichten, so das weitläufftige persianische Reich, und seine gehabten Fata, sonderlich aber die letztere grosse Revolution, unter denen dreyen Haupt-Rebellen, Miriweys, Maghmud und Eschref, wie auch die persianischen Regierungs-Art, Religion, Gebräuche und Gewohnheiten betreffen* (Leipzig and Rudolstadt, 1738).

⁹ Olivier H. Bonnerot, *La Perse dans la littérature et la pensée françaises au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1988), p. 190.

¹⁰ Michael Axworthy, *The Sword of Persia. Nader Shah, from Tribal Warrior to Conquering Hero* (London, 2006), p. 212.

quickly translated into English, Italian, and Spanish.¹¹ In the next few years the Asian warlord was the subject of a number of articles in the British press, some of which have been plausibly attributed to Samuel Johnson.¹² In 1741, volume 25 of the Jesuit compendium *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses* contained a section on the ‘revolutions in Persia under Nader Shah’.¹³ In the same year a Spanish writer named La Margne published a text titled *Vida de Thamàs Kouli-Kan*, which describes Nader’s Indian campaign.¹⁴ A year later the Anglo-Saxon world became thoroughly acquainted with Nader through James Fraser’s *History of Nader Shah*, which was mostly based on reports by William Cockell, an agent of the English East India Company who had served in Iran while Nader was in power.¹⁵ In the same year, 1742, James Spilman, a Russia Company merchant, published an account of a journey he had undertaken to Iran in 1739 to which was appended a brief account of the rise of Nader Shah.¹⁶ In 1743 André de Clautre’s *Histoire de Thamàs Kouli-Kan, roi de Perse* saw the light.¹⁷ A generation later the French reading public was reminded of Nader through the translation that William Jones made of Mirza Mohammad Mahdi Astarabadi’s important chronicle *Tarikh-e Naderi*.¹⁸

A fictionalised Nader quickly followed. The first novel featuring him—in which a young Swiss man sets out on an Asian adventure that includes his participation in Nader’s Indian campaign—appeared in 1754. A second one, presented as the memoirs of Shah Tahmasb II, followed in 1758. Its rather bizarre plot involves a Nader not of Turkic stock, but from Burgundy, a young man who goes east to find himself and who arrives in Iran, where he is able to test his mettle in the country’s army. Both reflect the spirit of a short-lived pacific European age in search of a heroic cause in their portrayal of young, poor, and intelligent men who find no outlet for their martial inclinations in Europe. They also reflect the prevailing notion in the West that the East, unfettered by feudal stratification, was open to talent.¹⁹ The same theme appears in the theatrical representation of Nader Shah. In France the first play depicting his tragic death was written in 1752, just five years after the actual event.²⁰ For decades after his assassination in 1747 Nader Shah would remain the subject of plays throughout Europe, from Holland and France to Italy.²¹

¹¹ Manjusha Kuruppath, ‘Casting despots in Dutch drama. The case of Nadir Shah in van Steenswyk’s *Thamàs Koelikan*’, *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 48 (2011), pp. 241–286; repr. in eadem, *Staging Asia. The Dutch East India Company and the Amsterdam Theatre* (Leiden, 2016), pp. 117–158. The English, Italian, and Spanish translations are: *The History of Thamàs Kouli Kan Sophi of Persia* (London, 1740); *Istoria di Thamàs Kouli-Kan Sofi di Persia* (London, 1741); Juan del Castillo (ed.), *Vida de Thamàs Kouli-Kan desde su nacimiento, hasta su entrada triunfante en Hispahan, después de sus victoriosas empresas contra el Gran Mogòl, y la grande Buckaria* (Madrid, 1741). See also the bibliography in Laurence Lockhart, *Nadir Shah. A Critical Study Based Mainly Upon Contemporary Sources* (London, 1938), pp. 314ff.

¹² Frederick Bernard, ‘The history of Nadir Shah. A new attribution to Johnson’, *The British Museum Quarterly* 34.3–4 (1970), pp. 95–96; and Sven Trakulhum, *Asiatische Revolutionen. Europa und der Aufstieg und Fall asiatischer Imperien (1600–1830)* (Frankfurt a/M and New York, 2018), p. 138.

¹³ *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses des missionnaires de la Compagnie de Jésus, tome XXV contenant la relation des Révolutions de la Perse sous Tamàs Kouli Kan* (Paris, 1741).

¹⁴ Laurence Lockhart, ‘De Voulton’s Noticia’, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 4.2 (1926), p. 228.

¹⁵ Lockhart, *Nadir Shah*, p. 305.

¹⁶ James Spilman, *A Journey through Russia into Persia; by two English gentlemen, who went in the year 1739, from Petersburg, ... To which is annex’d, a summary account of the rise of the famous Kouli Kan* (London, 1742).

¹⁷ André de Clautre, *Histoire de Thamàs Kouli-Kan, roi de Perse* (Paris, 1743).

¹⁸ William Jones, *Histoire de Nader-Chah connu sous le nom de Thamàs Kuli Khan, Empereur de Perse* (London, 1770). An abridged English translation of the same work from the hand of Jones was published as *The History of the Life of Nader Shah, King of Persia* (London, 1773).

¹⁹ Henry Laurens, *Les origines intellectuelles de l’expédition d’Égypte. L’Orientalisme islamisant en France (1698–1798)* (Istanbul-Paris, 1987), pp. 154–155.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

²¹ See, for example, Frans van Steenswyk, ‘Thamàs Koelikan of de verovering van het Mogolsche rijk, treurspel’ (Amsterdam, 1745; repr. Amsterdam, 1993); Vittorio Amedeo Cigna-Santi, ‘Tamàs Kouli-kan nell’india. Dramma

The way in which Nader was represented in the West varied by context. In the Dutch setting, he became an emblem of republicanism, a 'protagonist of lowly origins whose right to the throne sprang from his desire to serve his subjects'. In one play he accordingly comes off, rather bizarrely, not as a bloodthirsty tyrant, but as a compassionate ruler.²² As said, the image of the son of a humble shepherd turned master of a country, indeed, an empire, resonated in other circles as well. Yet a more common theme in the earliest European references to him was the image of the disciplined warrior, a rare example of the type until the appearance of Frederick the Great on the European scene in 1740.²³ The tenor of the Dutch report set the tone for the dominant image Nader came to project in the contemporary European mind. Fraser presents him as a charismatic ruler, but above all as a disciplinarian who might pull the Orient from its torpor. In pre-Napoleonic France, losing ground against the British around the globe, Nader was seen as a strongman worthy of emulation.²⁴

Yet, in time, the more negative aspects of Nader's career received ample attention as well. De Claustre, writing in an age that put a premium on the circulation of money as an engine of commercially generated prosperity, highlighted his rapaciousness and linked the vast treasure he brought back from India to the typical Oriental despot who plunders and hoards rather than builds.²⁵ Nader's cruelty and encroaching madness as the ultimate symbol of the descent into violence and destructiveness of a land previously known for its humanism, tolerance, and sophistication did not go unnoticed either. A good example is the verdict offered by the English merchant-traveller Jonas Hanway, who in 1743 visited Nader's army camp seeking to recoup the losses he had suffered dealing with a local warlord. In the widely read account of his travels in Russia and Iran, Hanway at once presented Nader's appearance as punishment for Iranian sloth and dissolution, and painted a lurid portrait of a usurper acting duplicitously and driven by greed and brutality. Indeed, to Hanway, Nader epitomised the idea of cruelty as perverse art that came to be seen as emblematic of Iran after the collapse of the Safavids.²⁶ Yet Hanway also set the tone for a later assessment of Nader by presenting the blinding of his son as the outcome of a terrible dilemma forced upon him by the latter's rebellion. Nader in this reading was torn between 'rage and tenderness' when Reza Qoli not only refused to repent but taunted his father into killing him. 'Necessity, Hanway intoned, thus obliged his darling son to deprive him of his eyesight'.²⁷

Nader Shah thus came to be included among the great historical figures remembered and highlighted in eighteenth-century Europe. The all-time greatest of these was, of course, Alexander the Great, whose Asian conquests served as a romantically inspiring and legitimising model. He attracted immense attention in the context of the eighteenth-century debate about the feasibility and justification of European expansion in Asia in general and the actual British penetration of India in particular. Alexander and Nader were portrayed in remarkably similar ways at this juncture. In Alexander's case, too, ambivalence reigned. Authors highlighted the destructive as well as the creative elements

per musica...' (Turin, 1772); Paul Ulric Dubuisson, 'Nadir ou Thamas Kouli Kan' (Paris, 1780); Pietro Chiaro, 'La morte di Kouli Kan. Tragedia di lieto fine' (Bologna, 1781).

²² See Kuruppath, *Staging Asia*, p. 121.

²³ Bernard, 'The history of Nadir Shah', p. 95.

²⁴ Junko Thérèse Takeda, *Iran and a French Empire of Trade, 1700–1808. The Other Persian Letters* (Liverpool, 2020), p. 159.

²⁵ De Claustre, *Histoire de Thamas Kouli-Kan*, pp. 433–437.

²⁶ Jonas Hanway, *An Historical Account of the British Trade over the Caspian Sea: With a Journal of Travels through Russia into Persia...to which are added, the Revolutions of Persia during the Present Century, with the Particular History of the Great Usurper Nadir Kouli*, 4 vols (London, 1753), vol. i, pp. 274, 335.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, vol. iv, p. 211.

of his career and debated which of the two prevailed. In the case of Nader, there was no such hesitation. Although Nader was seen to have much in common with Alexander, he could never rise to his stature of conqueror-statesman. Of lowly pedigree, he remained an Oriental despot, lacking the redeeming qualities of Alexander, who was after all Greek, creative, a civilising force. Alexander was a conqueror in the eyes of the *philosophes*, but he had also considerably ‘enlarged the sphere of navigation and geographical knowledge among the Greeks’. He had not just conquered the Orient, he had opened it up—to commerce, the ultimately civilising vehicle in the age of Enlightenment. He was a ruler who ‘possessed talents which fitted him not only to conquer, but to govern the world’. For all his cruelty, Alexander had founded more cities than he had destroyed. Nader, by contrast, was one of the ‘fierce men’ rather than one of the ‘admirable heroes’. Just by invading and despoiling India he did not deserve the title of second Alexander.²⁸ In Hanway’s comparative assessment, ‘Alexander was most beloved; Nasir most feared’, and ‘The one affected a love to mankind; the other did not pretend so much to act upon principle of humanity. Both appear to us as objects of terror and astonishment; but whilst some mixture of love, or compassion, is due to Alexander’s memory; Nadir can only excite our hatred.’²⁹

Nader in the Persian-language sources

Contemporary Persian-language sources evince a similar ambivalence. Those who suffered through the misery of the period portray him in a negative light. Mohammad Hazin Lahiji, the late Safavid man of letters, who ended up in exile in India having lost everything in the chaos following the Afghan assault, is a good example, with his focus on the warlord’s cruelty and destructiveness.³⁰ The chroniclers writing in Nader Shah’s immediate orbit naturally hedged their bets and defuse the ruler’s obvious ruthlessness and gathering madness by turning a blind eye to these uncomfortable facts or by blaming the victims. They generally portray Nader as a ruler of sound lineage and military virtue, and defend him against the indictment of having usurped power by hailing him as a self-made strongman who, following the feeble and unworthy last Safavid rulers, had restored order to his country.³¹ Mirza Mahdi Khan Astarabadi, Nader’s main chronicler, exemplifies this position by marking the fall of the Safavids as the end of their legitimacy. Astarabadi set the tone for an enduring narrative by lauding his master for trouncing and expelling all foreign occupiers from Iranian soil. At pains to rationalise the ruler’s growing craziness and cruelty, he created the impression that Nader had changed and brought ruin to his country only after his expedition to the Caucasus—at which point he had blinded Reza Qoli.³² The other major chronicler of the times, Mohammad Kazem Marvi, echoes Astarabadi in praising Nader’s prowess, but he comes at it from a different angle: he portrays him as a formidable warrior but casts doubt on his right to rule since real legitimacy

²⁸ Pierre Briant, *The First European: A History of Alexander in the Age of Empire* (Cambridge, MA, 2017), pp. 117–126; and Christoph A. Hagerman, ‘In the footsteps of the Macedonian conqueror: Alexander the Great and British India’, *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 16.3–4 (2009), pp. 366–368. For the legend of Alexander in the Persian tradition, see Haila Manteghi, *Alexander the Great in the Persian Tradition. History, Myth and Legend in Medieval Iran* (London, 2019).

²⁹ Hanway, *An Historical Account*, vol. ii, p. 353.

³⁰ Mohammad ‘Ali b. Abi Taleb Hazin Lahiji, *Resa’el-e Hazin Lahiji*, (eds) ‘Ali Owjabi et al. (Tehran, 1998), pp. 217ff.

³¹ Ernest Tucker, ‘Historiography in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century’, in *Persian Historiography*, (ed.) Charles Melville (London, 2012), p. 275.

³² Mirza Mahdi Khan Astarabadi, *Tarikh-e jahan-gosha-ye Naderi* (Tehran, 1989); and Id., *Dorreh-ye Nadereh. Tarikh-e ‘asr-e Nader Shah*, 2nd edn (Tehran, 1987), pp. 643ff.

continues to adhere to the descendants of the Safavids.³³ For others living in the immediate aftermath of his rule, too, he was already the great warrior who had liberated Iran from foreign domination. Almas Khan, a poet writing in Gurani Kurdish, a language spoken in north-western Iran, composed the *Jangnameh-ye Nader*, a work of some 3,500 lines, in that vein.³⁴ Mir ‘Abd al-Latif Khan Shushtari, an Iranian who spent the second half of his life in India, decried the decline and fall of the Safavids and the subsequent general unrest and chaos in the country until Nader Shah, a *padeshah-e qahhar* (forceful ruler) made his appearance.³⁵ The height of sycophantic praise is evinced by Mohammad ‘Ali Tusi, an otherwise unknown poet who wrote a rather mediocre *Shahnama-ye Naderi* in which he glorifies the warlord’s exploits, including the Indian campaign, only to opportunistically change course following the warrior’s death, at which point he vilifies Nader for the devastation he wrought.³⁶ In the wider Persianate world, Nader’s name and fame continued to resonate long after his death. In particular, in the part of Central Asia conquered by him, he came to be celebrated as an awe-inspiring, divinely ordained world-conqueror, heir to the legacy of Timur Lang.³⁷

The nineteenth century: Nader Shah and Napoleon Bonaparte

The turn of the nineteenth century saw the rise of a new dynasty—the Qajars—who, after a tumultuous start, managed to bring some stability to the Iranian plateau. An upstart household of questionable roots and uncertain legitimacy, the Qajars faced a conundrum regarding the question of lineage and sovereignty. They had to acknowledge their forebears, the Safavids, to whom they paid allegiance on account of the Shi‘i credentials they themselves so sorely lacked, as well as distance themselves from them by expunging their legacy. Nader Shah presented them with a real dilemma. Agha Mohammad Khan, the founder of the Qajar dynasty and a ruthless warlord himself, in 1796 selected the plain of Moghan in Azerbaijan for his coronation, the same site where Nader had had himself crowned exactly 60 years earlier.³⁸ Yet subsequently he chose to distance himself from Nader, blaming him for having deviated from the Shi‘i foundations laid by the Safavids and which Agha Mohammad Khan in turn invoked to buttress his own legitimacy.³⁹ Indeed, the shah sought to erase Nader’s memory by destroying his sepulchre, located next to the shrine of Imam Reza in Mashhad, and having the body reburied, first in

³³ Mohammad Kazem Marvi, *‘Alam ara-ye Naderi*, 2nd edn, 3 vols, (ed.) Mohammad Amin Riyahi (Tehran, 1990); as analysed by Ernest Tucker, ‘Explaining Nadir Shah: kingship and royal legitimacy in Muhammad Kazim Marvis’s *Tārikh-i ‘ālam-ārā-yi Nādiri*’, *Iranian Studies* 26.1–2 (1993), pp. 95–117.

³⁴ Almas Khan Kanduleh-i, *Jangnameh-ye Nader*, (trans and ed.) Mazhar Advay (Tehran, 2017).

³⁵ Mir ‘Abd al-Latif Khan, Shushtari, *Tohfāt al-‘alam*, (ed.) Samad Movahhed (Tehran, 1984), pp. 270–271. Interestingly, even contemporary Indian sources tend to exculpate Nader for his behaviour, including the massacre he ordered in Delhi, blaming the victims for the horrors by referring to their seditiousness. See Abhishek Kaicker, *The King and the People. Sovereignty and Popular Politics in Mughal Delhi* (Oxford, 2020), p. 43.

³⁶ Abbas Amanat, ‘Shahnameh-ye Naderi and the revival of epic poetry in post-Safavid Iran’, in *A Layered Heart; Essays on Persian Poetry. A Celebration in Honor of Dick Davis*, (ed.) Ali-Asghar Seyed-Ghorab (Washington, DC, 2018), pp. 295–318.

³⁷ This veneration necessitated Nader’s conversion to Sunni Islam in the local memory. See James Pickett, ‘Nadir Shah’s peculiar Central Asian legacy: empire, conversion narratives, and the rise of the new scholarly dynasties’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 48.3 (2016), pp. 491–510; and Mohammad Amir Hakimi Pars, ‘The imperial legacy of Nader in Transoxiana (Turan) as reflected in early Manghit chronicles’, *Iran. Journal of the British Institute of Persian Studies* (2023), published online 30 January 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1080/05786967.2023.2170816>.

³⁸ Michael Axworthy, ‘The awkwardness of Nader Shah’, in *Crisis, Collapse, Militarism and Civil War. The History and Historiography of 18th-Century Iran*, (ed.) Michael Axworthy (Oxford, 2018), p. 54.

³⁹ Abbas Amanat, ‘The Kayanid crown and Qajar reclaiming of royal authority’, *Iranian Studies* 34.1–4 (2001), p. 23.

Tehran, then in Najaf, Iraq.⁴⁰ As the German traveller Moritz Wagner put it: ‘The Kadschar dynasty has never provided a ruler to compare in ability, with the Afschar Nadir Shah. Hence, perhaps, their deep hatred of the latter. Mohamed Shah was puerile enough to order the bones of the Great Nadir to be buried under his door-posts, that he might tread over them so often as he left the palace.’⁴¹ And indeed, Rostam al-Hokama, a nineteenth-century man of letters behind whom court historiographer Reza Qoli Khan Hedayat is likely to have been hiding, in his picaresque *Rostam al-Tavarikh*, faults Nader for draining Iran of its wealth as well as for his general mismanagement.⁴²

His public disavowal notwithstanding, Agha Mohammad Khan must have been impressed by his forebear all the same, for he had two figures added to the portraits adorning the walls of the Chehel Sotun palace in Isfahan, one showing a confrontation between Shah Isma‘il I against the Ottomans, the other representing Nader’s defeat of the Mughal Emperor Mohammad Khan at Karnal in 1739.⁴³ Nader also featured in one of the main halls of the Golestan palace that was built in the newly chosen capital of Tehran and renovated in 1806—in a pose of returning the crown of India to the Indian king.⁴⁴ Nader, it seems, was ineradicable. John Malcolm, Britain’s first real envoy to Iran and the author of Iran’s first real history, gave this assessment of the Iranian appreciation of him at the time:

They [the Persians] speak of him as a deliverer and a destroyer; but while they dwell with pride on his deeds of glory, they express more pity than horror for the cruel enormities which disgraced the latter years of his reign; and neither his crimes, nor his attempt to abolish their religion, have subdued their gratitude and veneration for the hero, who revived in the breasts of his degraded countrymen a sense of their former fame, and who restored Persia to independence.⁴⁵

The early nineteenth century saw two developments that helped shape an even more complex image of Nader Shah. The first was the string of humiliating military defeats the Iranian Qajar rulers suffered against their most formidable enemies, the Russians. The second was the meteoric rise of Napoleon Bonaparte, followed by a career that affected the world from the East Coast of the United States and the Caribbean to the shores of the Indian Ocean.

The military weakness of the Qajars against the Russians and the tremendous loss of land their defeats entailed quickly detracted from the new dynasty’s aura and made the Iranian public long for a success story. Abbas Amanat sees a direct relationship between the humiliation the Qajars suffered on the battlefield and the continuing, indeed growing, popularity of Nader Shah among Iranians, as exemplified in the more than

⁴⁰ Hasan Fasa’i, *Farsnameh-ye Naseri (History of Persia under Qajar Rule)*, (trans.) H. Busse (New York, 1972), p. 70. According to George Fowler, who visited Iran in the 1830s, the bones were buried at Imarat Khurshid in Tehran. See George Fowler, *Three Years in Persia: With Travelling Adventures in Koordistan*, 2 vols (London, 1841), vol. i, p. 156.

⁴¹ Moritz Wagner, *Travels in Persia, Georgia and Koordistan*, 3 vols (London, 1856), vol. iii, p. 173.

⁴² Rostam al-Hokama, *Rostam al-tavarikh*, 2nd edn, (ed.) Mohammad Moshiri (Tehran, 1973), pp. 210, 211, 222. For the claim that Rostam al-Hokama is most likely a pseudonym of E’temad al-Saltaneh, see Jalil Nowzari, *Nevisandeh-ye Rostam al-tavarikh kist? Pezhuheshi dar negah-e u beh Iran* (Tehran, 2017).

⁴³ Layla S. Diba, ‘Images of power and the power of images: intention and response in early Qajar painting (1785–1834)’, in *Royal Persian Paintings. The Qajar Epoch, 1785–1925*, (eds) Layla S. Diba and Maryam Ekhtiar (New York and London, 1998), p. 34.

⁴⁴ Willem Floor, *Wall Paintings in Qajar Iran* (Costa Mesa, 2005), p. 49.

⁴⁵ John Malcolm, *The History of Persia: From the Most Early Period to the Present Time* (London, 1829), vol. ii, p. 52.

14 editions that appeared of Astarabadi's popular account of Nader's life and exploits, the *Jahan-gosha-ye Naderi*.⁴⁶

The relationship between the reputation of Napoleon and that of Nader Shah in Iran—and Europe—seems something like a dialogic engagement: Napoleon saw himself as a latter-day Nader. Iranians, in turn, came to admire Napoleon as the strongman they themselves so sorely lacked in the nineteenth century. Nader, in due time and in good Orientalist fashion, became known, first in Europe, then in Iran, as the Asian or Persian Napoleon. Some Iranians, completing the cycle in an anti-Orientalist (and chronologically more apposite) manner, thought of Napoleon as the European Nader Shah. Yet the image of Nader as the Persian Napoleon has come to prevail until today.⁴⁷

All indications are that Napoleon was indeed greatly impressed with Nader. It is almost certain that, as a young man, Napoleon, by all accounts a voracious reader, read about Nader's exploits; and it is likely that he identified with the story of a lad of humble origins who had risen to great heights through sheer willpower and energy. Napoleon's Asian dreams—his own search for a heroic cause—are neatly summed up in his famous exclamation before a group of bickering German princes in 1804: 'Il n'y a plus rien à faire en Europe! Ce n'est que dans l'Orient qu'on peut travailler grand; ce n'est que la que se font les grandes réputations, les grandes fortunes' (There is nothing more to do in Europe! Only in the Orient can great things be accomplished. Only there are great reputations and fortunes made).⁴⁸ That Napoleon greatly admired Nader emerges from the record of Amédée Jaubert, the French Orientalist who, having acted as Napoleon's interpreter in Egypt, visited Iran in 1807 to conclude a Franco-Iranian alliance. Jaubert carried with him a letter from Napoleon in which the French emperor, somewhat injudiciously in front of the sedentary Fath 'Ali Shah, praised Nader Shah as a 'great warrior', who was 'able to conquer a great power', who 'struck the insurgents with terror and was fearsome to his neighbors', while he 'triumphed over his enemies and reigned gloriously'.⁴⁹ It is also surely no coincidence that 'Askar Khan Afshar, Fath 'Ali Shah's envoy to Paris in 1808, presented a copy of Mirza Mehdi's (Astarabadi's) *Jahangosha-ye Naderi* to the Imperial Library in Paris when he visited the city the following year.⁵⁰ *L'Histoire de Thamas Kouli-Kan*, finally, was one of the books available to Napoleon during his years in exile on Saint Helena between 1815 and 1821.⁵¹

Napoleon, in turn, made quite an impression in Iran—and a lasting one at that. There are several reasons why he became and long remained a familiar figure in Iran. One is that the country was part of his strategic vision, leading him to deal directly with its rulers by way of diplomacy. He also raised Iranian spirits by invading Russia at a time when that country was clobbering Iran.⁵² But the main reason for his enduring fame and popularity may have been the same as that which made eighteenth-century Europeans look up to Nader Shah—because his strong character spoke to the imagination of the Iranians

⁴⁶ Abbas Amanat, 'Historiography of Qajar Iran (1785–1925)', in *Persian Historiography*, (ed.) Melville, p. 297.

⁴⁷ For an early reference to Nader Shah as the 'Napoleon of Persia', see Robert B. M. Binning, *A Journal of Two Years' Travels in Persia, Ceylon, etc.*, 2 vols (London, 1857), vol. ii, p. 257. For latter-day versions, see Ajay Kumar, 'Nadir Shah Afshar: The Iranian Napoleon', at <https://medium.com/@ajhkumar/nader-shah-afshar-the-iranian-napoleon-699dda109ff1#ghz2e8412> (accessed 3 February 2023); 'Nader Shah, the Persian Napoleon', *Weapons and Warfare*, 2016, at <https://weaponsandwarfare.com/2016/02/05/nader-shah-the-persian-napoleon/> (last accessed 2 January 2022); and 'Nader Shah, the Real Napoleon', YouTube, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tGQC2W9mvdE> (accessed 3 February 2022).

⁴⁸ Benoist-Méchin, *Bonaparte en Égypte ou le rêve inassouvi* (Lausanne, 1966), p. 318.

⁴⁹ Iradj Amini, *Napoleon and Persia. Franco-Persian Relations under the First Empire* (Washington, DC, 1999), p. 57.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

⁵¹ Fadi El Hage, *Napoléon historien* (Paris, 2016), p. 39.

⁵² Muriel Atkin, *Russia and Iran, 1780–1828* (Minneapolis, 1980), p. 110.

since it projected something that they found missing in their own rulers. The aforementioned Shushtari, who appears to have imbibed some anti-French sentiments during his long stay in British India, nevertheless called Napoleon a leader who stood out for his organisational skills, his wisdom, and his sophistication. The Europeans, he insisted, all praised his courage and told many stories about him.⁵³ Iran's falling out with France following the Treaty of Tilsit that Napoleon concluded with Russia in 1807 does not seem to have diminished the French emperor's lustre for Iranians. One famous portrait of Fath 'Ali Shah shows him in full regalia, with a sceptre, in what many believe is a clear allusion to an equally imposing portrait that Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres made of the French emperor.⁵⁴ Mirza Saleh Shirazi, the most prominent member of the first batch of Iranian students sent to Europe in 1812, offers a lengthy and quite accurate description of Napoleon in his well-known travelogue.⁵⁵ John Malcolm relates how in 1810, Napoleon's 'name was familiar to numbers in Persia, and some few understood the character of his power'.⁵⁶ His 'old friend', Agha Mohammad Qasem Valeh of Isfahan, a poet and a philosopher, told Malcolm that, in his opinion, 'This Buonaparte... is a wonderful man; he wields empires as if they were clubs.' He added that, after coming to terms with the Ottomans, this Western Chengiz Khan (Faringee Chengiz Khan) might take on Iran and Russia and then, 'make use of both to overthrow your [British] power in India'.⁵⁷

Various prominent nineteenth-century Iranian (and Afghan) officials are on record as being impressed by Napoleon, or at least the image of Napoleon. One who greatly admired the French warlord and emperor was 'Abbas Mirza (1789–1833), crown prince, governor of Azerbaijan, and Iran's first modern reformer. Moritz von Kotzebue, who in 1817 accompanied a Russian diplomatic mission to Iran, left a description of 'Abbas Mirza's newly constructed summer palace at Ujan near Soltaniyeh. Describing the audience hall, he noted how it was decorated with four paintings, two of which represented the Russian Tsar Alexander I and Napoleon respectively.⁵⁸ By 1867 most of the palace had fallen to ruin, but the audience hall was still standing, as is confirmed by Ernest Crampon, France's consul in Tabriz at the time. Crampon also commented on the well-preserved murals, including the image of the French general.⁵⁹

Another admirer of the French emperor was Mohammad 'Ali Mirza Dowlatshah, Fath 'Ali Shah's oldest son and governor of Kermanshah between 1806 and 1821, a competent and strong-willed ruler who was also a man of letters. In 1807, having been apprised of the particulars of the campaign of Austerlitz in an audience with the French consul-general at Aleppo, M. Rousseau, Mohammad 'Ali Mirza expressed great admiration for the French emperor and the fighting spirit he had instilled in his soldiers.⁶⁰ Other Iranian officials who were dazzled by Napoleon include Hajji Baba, a Qajar 'prince' in Hamadan, who, when Robert Cotton Money met him in 1824, 'asked all about Napoleon', and collected 'all the anecdotes he could of him' because he 'seemed to adore his character'.⁶¹ Another was the third Qajar ruler, Mohammad Shah (r. 1834–1848). In the words of

⁵³ Shushtari, *Tohfat al-'alam*, p. 256.

⁵⁴ C. A. Bayly, *The Birth of Modern World 1780–1914* (Malden, MA and Oxford, 2004), pp. 376–367, citing S. J. Falk, *Qajar Paintings: Persian Oil Paintings of the 18th and 19th Centuries* (London, 1972).

⁵⁵ Mirza Saleh Shirazi, *Safarnameh-ye Mirza Saleh Shirazi*, (ed.) Esma'il Ra'in (Tehran, 1968).

⁵⁶ John Malcolm, *Sketches of Persia. From the Journals of a Traveller in the East* (London, 1827), p. 225.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 225–226.

⁵⁸ Moritz von Kotzebue, *Narrative of a Journey to Persia in the Suite of the Imperial Russian Embassy in the Year 1817* (London, 1819), pp. 188–189.

⁵⁹ Archives Nationales de France, Nantes, 685PO/1/77, Crampon to Paris, 12 Oct. 1867, fol. 93.

⁶⁰ M. Rousseau, 'Extrait de l'itinéraire d'un voyage en Perse par la voie de Baghdad', *Fundgruben des Orients* 3 (1813), pp. 85–98 (96).

⁶¹ R. C. M. [Robert Cotton Money], *Journal of a Tour in Persia, during the Years 1824 and 1825* (London, 1828), p. 192.

William Richard Holmes, his palace in Tehran was ‘hung round with various prints of Napoleon, Prince Albert and Queen Victoria, and some others, of which the value might have been sixpence each’.⁶² Mohammad Shah is said to have been interested in acquiring a copy of the *Life of Napoleon*, illustrated with engravings of the emperor’s battles, as an improvement over the incomplete biography of the French emperor by Walter Scott, the French translation of which he had ordered in 1827 and which Mme de la Marnierre read to him every night. He thus ordered Mirza Reza Mohandes, who had earlier translated biographies of Peter I, Alexander the Great, and Charles XII into Persian, to produce a translation of a history of the French general from an English rendering of an originally French work.⁶³ In 1840 a copy of an illustrated biography of Napoleon was given to the shah as part of the gifts brought by the French diplomat Félix Édouard Comte de Sercey.⁶⁴ Richard Khan, too, in 1869 rendered *A Brief History of Napoleon* into Persian as *Tarikh-e mokhtasar-e Napuliyun-e avval*.⁶⁵ In the early twentieth century ‘Abbas Mirza Salar Lashkar (also known as Nayeab al-Saltaneh) picked up a book titled *Napoleon Ier et la Perse* and decided to translate it into Persian.⁶⁶

In neighbouring Afghanistan, too, Napoleon left his mark. The French military officer Joseph Ferrier, visiting Herat in 1845, claimed that the Afghans looked up to Napoleon as a demi-god. During a dinner at the residence of the local ruler, Yar Mohammad Khan, all the attendees got drunk and told Ferrier that, although they had no knowledge of the French, they thought their sovereign, Napoleon, was ‘almost as great a man as Nadir Shah’. Their only regret was that he was not a Muslim.⁶⁷

As noted, the revised image of Nader, from power monger and brutal tyrant to saviour of the nation, was likely to have been greatly facilitated by widespread Iranian disappointment with the feeble Qajars, and further built, in a dialectical way, on the analogy with Napoleon. James Morier, British envoy and the author of the picaresque novel *Hajji Baba of Isfahan*, in 1808 said about the Iranians that, ‘of Bonaparte, from the likeness of that of their own Nadir Shah, they have a very high idea’.⁶⁸ But the way in which the warlord

⁶² William Richard Holmes, *Sketches on the Shores of the Caspian* (London, 1845), p. 367.

⁶³ Eugène Boré, *Correspondance et mémoires d’un voyageur en Orient*, 2 vols (Paris, 1840), vol. ii, p. 123; Floor, *Wall Paintings*, p. 40; Christophe Balajy, *La genèse du roman persan moderne* (Tehran, 1998), p. 42; and Jean Calmard, ‘Une dame française à la cour de Perse. Louise Mme de la Marnierre (Paris 1781–Shiraz 1840)’, *Studia Iranica* 46.2 (2017), pp. 261–311 (278). According to Homa Nategh, Mohammad Shah commissioned a translation of Walter Scott’s famous biography of Napoleon, which came out in France in 1827, in English, with a simultaneous French translation. See Homa Nategh, *Karnamēh-ye farangi dar Iran* (Paris, 1996), p. 56, translated as *Les Français en Perse. Les écoles religieuses et séculières (1837–1921)* (Paris, 2014), p. 31. Not all Iranians were enamoured of Napoleon. Mirza Hajji Agasi, Mohammad Shah’s mystically inclined chief minister, did not exactly fawn over the French warlord. As Wilbraham reports, ‘On one occasion, someone having ventured to praise the generalship of Napoleon, the Haji sharply interrupted him, saying, “Napoleon! Whose dog was Napoleon?”’ See Captain Richard Wilbraham, *Travels in the Transcaucasian Provinces of Russia and along the Southern Shore of Lakes of Van and Urumiah in the Autumn and Winter of 1837* (London, 1839), p. 20.

⁶⁴ Eugène Flandin and Pascal Coste, *Voyage en Perse de MM. Eugène Flandin, peintre, et Pascal Coste, architecte*, 3 vols (Paris, 1851–1853), vol. i, p. 303.

⁶⁵ Maryam D. Ekhtiar, ‘The Dār al-Funūn: Educational Reform and Cultural Development in Qajar Iran’, (unpublished PhD dissertation, New York University, 1994), p. 317.

⁶⁶ ‘Abbas Mirza, *Ravabet-e Napuliyun va Iran* (Tehran, n.d.). The story is told in Bahman Farman Farmaian, ‘Persia and Napoleon. The story of a book and its author’, *Qajar Studies* 7 (2007), pp. 153–168. The enduring legacy of Napoleon in Iran is encapsulated in the mythical image of him obsessively nurtured by Da’i Jan Napole’on/My Uncle Napoleon in Iraj Pezeshkzad’s famous eponymous novel. See Iraj Pezeshkzad, *My Uncle Napoleon* (Washington, DC, 1996), esp. pp. 28–29.

⁶⁷ J. P. Ferrier, *Caravan Journeys and Wanderings in Persia, Afghanistan, Turkistan and Beloochistan* (London, 1856), pp. 183, 187.

⁶⁸ James Morier, *A Second Journey Through Persia, Armenia, and Asia Minor, to Constantinople, Between the Years 1810 and 1816* (London, 1818), p. 184.

was fashioned in the twentieth century was in some way a calque on the way Western authors, and especially John Malcolm, had portrayed him. To Malcolm, Nader Shah was a force of nature, a barbarian who acted to purify the decadent civilisation from which he himself sprang.⁶⁹ Where the Polish Father Judas Thaddeus Krusiński, an eyewitness to the fall of Isfahan in 1722, had seen the Afghans as barbarians who might be civilised by becoming acquainted with Persia's superior culture, Malcolm, who was more than two generations removed from the events he described, saw in Nader Shah a volcanic force that had rejuvenated that same culture precisely by ridding it of Afghan primitivism. Malcolm saw Nader in the same the way Edward Gibbon had seen Attila the Hun: as a great warrior and disciplinarian who had cleansed the land by liberating his people from the yoke of unruly barbarians. Full of admiration for Nader's military prowess, Malcolm self-servingly painted a redeeming portrait of the eighteenth-century empire builder, based on his anticipation of the unfolding of his own empire, that of the British. As Jürgen Osterhammel puts it, 'In the year of Waterloo he saw in Nader less the Oriental Bonaparte than the precursor of his own deeds.'⁷⁰ It is telling in this context that Malcolm did not dwell on the savagery that accompanied Nader's subjugation of northern India and his sack of Delhi, thinking it greatly exaggerated. The bloodletting of the last few years of the warrior's life he ascribed to creeping insanity.⁷¹

Malcolm's assessment would essentially offer the template for the later nationalist Iranian portrayal of Nader. Of course, for this to have an impact on the country's image making, Malcolm's book first needed to be translated into Persian. This might have happened as early as the 1840s were it not for Naser al-Din's grand vizier and chief counsellor Mirza Taqi Khan, better known as Amir Kabir, who, wary of Malcolm's less than flattering verdict on the Qajar dynasty, is said to have cautioned his master that 'for Persians reading such a book is fatally poisonous'.⁷² That does not seem to have deterred the monarch himself, for the shah apparently had *A History of Persia* read to him before going to sleep.⁷³ In the event, the acquaintance among the wider Iranian public with Malcolm's take on Nader and Iranian history at large would have to wait until the 1870s, when, at the behest of Mohammad Esma'il Khan, the governor of Kerman, whose father had known and liked Malcolm, a translation of his book was undertaken. Yet the text that resulted did not come out in Iran but in British-controlled Bombay, in the context of the new print culture that by then had developed in India under British auspices.⁷⁴ Over time, this translation would become exceedingly popular.

⁶⁹ For an insightful assessment of Malcolm as a quintessential Enlightenment figure who showed deep insight into Iran and its society, see Ali M. Ansari, 'Sir John Malcolm and the idea of Iran', in *Ferdowsi, the Mongols and the History of Iran. Art, Literature and Culture from Early Islam to Qajar Persia. Studies in Honour of Charles Melville*, (eds) Robert Hillenbrand, A. C. S. Peacock and Firuza Abdullaeva (London, 2013), pp. 209–217.

⁷⁰ Jürgen Osterhammel, *Die Entzauberung Asiens. Europa und die asiatischen Reiche im 18. Jahrhundert* (Munich, 2010), p. 227. Hegel had a similar take on Chinggis Khan, viewing him as a cleansing broom. See Olmo Gölz, "'Besen Gottes". Dschingis Khans Platz in der deutschen Geschichtsphilosophie', in *Helden—Heroisierungen—Heroismen*, (eds) Ronald G. Ascha, Barbara Korte and Ralf den Hoff (Baden-Baden, 2020), pp. 91–106.

⁷¹ Osterhammel, *Die Entzauberung Asiens*, pp. 226–227, 233.

⁷² Abbas Amanat, *Pivot of the Universe: Nasir al-Din Shah Qajar and the Iranian Monarchy, 1831–1896* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1997), p. 130.

⁷³ In Reza Zia-Ebrahimi, *The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism. Race and the Politics of Dislocation* (New York, 2016), p. 35.

⁷⁴ The translation was published as *Tarikh-e Malkom*, (trans.) Mirza Mohammad 'Ali Kashkul (Bombay, 1873). The story of how Mohammad Esma'il Khan Vakil al-Molk asked the British official Frederick Jon Goldsmid to have Malcolm's book translated, is told in Farzin Vejdani, *Making History in Iran: Education, Nationalism, and Print Culture* (Stanford, 2014), p. 25. Fereydu Adamiyat lists the Persian translation of Malcolm's work as an early example of Western works being translated, but omits to give any bibliographical reference. See Fereydu Adamiyat, *Andisheh'ha-ye Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani*, 2nd edn (Tehran, 1978), p. 152.

Its impact is seen, among other things, in Fasa'i's *Farsnameh-ye Naseri*, which was originally published in 1896 and which frequently refers to Malcolm's *History of Persia*.⁷⁵ Malcolm's work may also have been known to Mohammad Mehdi b. Mohammad Reza al-Esfahani, the author of *Nesf-e Jahan fi ta'rif al-Esfahan*, a late nineteenth-century work on the former Safavid capital. Writing in 1890–1891, he portrays Nader as a warlord in the tradition of Alexander, Caesar, Chinggis Khan, Timur Lang, and Napoleon. He mentions the fact that Nader chased the Afghans out of Iran, yet does not omit to refer to his gratuitous violence and the lunacy that overtook him towards the end.⁷⁶ How long Malcolm's name and fame resonated among ordinary Iranians is suggested by an anecdote told by British Persia scholar Ann Lambton, who records how during a trip to central Iran in 1934 she was shown a copy of the Persian translation of Malcolm's book by a proud village headman who regarded it as 'the last word on the history of his country'.⁷⁷ Incidentally, it is in this same period, between 1869 and 1892, that several French works on Napoleon and French history were published in translation in Iran.⁷⁸ These, together with a number of books on other aspects of French history, found a place in Naser al-Din Shah's personal library.⁷⁹ Towards the end of his reign, the same ruler also commissioned a translation of James Fraser's *History of Nader Shah*, which was not published until 1902, though.⁸⁰

Nader Shah in modern Iranian historiography

The name Nader Shah has continued to resonate among Iranians in modern times, his reputation either that of a savage, self-serving warlord or a national liberator. Esfahani's work on Isfahan, the city that Nader ravaged, unsurprisingly depicts him as a greedy military commander.⁸¹ Nazem al-Eslam Kermani, a progressive cleric and a participant-narrator of the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–1911, by contrast, sarcastically compares the rugged austerity Nader displayed as a commander-in chief to the decadent frivolousness of Sho'a' al-Saltaneh, second son of Mozaffar al-Din Shah (r. 1896–1907) and governor of Fars.⁸² How much Nader Shah lived on in the popular Iranian imagination at the time as a man of strength and a role model is suggested by the actions of the Russia-sponsored agent-provocateur and rebel rouser Yusof Herati, a supporter of Iran's deposed ruler, Mohammad Shah, who in early 1912 invaded the shrine of Imam Reza in Mashhad with his posse of thugs, *lutis*, and kept it occupied for some weeks. At one point during his stand-off with the authorities, Herati was said to have seized some Babis, adherents to a faith that, in analogy to Shi'ism, preaches recurrent revelation, threatening to hang them. He had, however, released them after 'receiving some money'. Meanwhile he kept increasing his forces, boasting that, in his defiance, he was

⁷⁵ Hajj Mirza Hoseyni Fasa'i, *Farsnameh-ye Naseri*, 2 vols paginated as one, (ed.) Mansur Rastegar Fasa'i (Tehran, 1988).

⁷⁶ Mohammad Mehdi b. Mohammad Reza al-Esfahani, *Nesf-e Jahan fi ta'rif al-Esfahan*, (ed.) Manuchehr Setudeh (Tehran, 1961; repr. 1989).

⁷⁷ A. K. S. Lambton, 'Major-General Sir John Malcolm (1769–1833) and "The History of Persia"', *Iran. Journal of the British Institute of Persian Studies* 33 (1995), pp. 97–109 (99).

⁷⁸ Amanat, 'Historiography of Qajar Iran', pp. 348–349; and Ekhtiar, 'The Dār al-Funūn', pp. 317–318.

⁷⁹ See Sayyed Mohammad Hoseyn Hakim, 'Fehrest-e Ketabkhaneh-ye andaruni-ye Naser al-Din Shah', *Awraq-e 'Atiq, daftar-e cheharom* (n.p., 2015), pp. 835–866.

⁸⁰ James Fraser, *Tarikh-e Nader Shah Afshar*, (trans.) Abo'l Qasem Naser al-Molk Qaraguzlu (Tehran, 1904). See Vejdani, *Making History in Iran*, p. 22; and Khanbaba Moshar, *Fehrest-e ketabha-ye chapi-ye Farsi*, 6 vols (Tehran, 1985), vol. i, p. 278.

⁸¹ Esfahani, *Nesf-e jahan fi ta'rif al-Esfahan*, pp. 264–268.

⁸² Nazem al-Eslam Kermani, *Tarikh-e bidari-ye Iraniyan*, 3 vols (Tehran, 1978), vol. i, p. 305.

imitating Nader Shah.⁸³ In *Kaveh*, a Berlin-based modernist-nationalist magazine published in Persian in the 1920s, Nader is similarly presented as the last of the great Iranian warriors who showed courage in resisting foreign powers.⁸⁴

The fall of the Qajars and the rise of Reza Shah, the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty, in the 1920s inaugurated a new phase in the complicated historiography regarding Nader Shah. On 1 February 1922, a year after Reza Khan had marched on Tehran and staged the coup that would bring him to power, Fernand Prévost, the French ambassador in Tehran at the time, likened him to a Roman general with imperial ambitions and, more appositely, to Nader Shah.⁸⁵ Shortly thereafter, Georges Ducrocq, French military attaché in the Iranian capital, posed the rhetorical question of whether Reza Khan had any personal ambitions and whether he would like to be the Nader Shah of Persia.⁸⁶ The Iranian press followed suit. In January 1924, the prominent newspaper *Setareh-ye Iran* published an article titled 'The Republican Regime', which likened Reza Khan to Nader Shah, a forceful ruler who had ended the ignominy of Afghan rule caused by the feeble rulers who had preceded him.⁸⁷ British foreign secretary Victor Mallet in 1925 insisted that the eighteenth-century warlord was Reza Khan's (now Reza Shah's) 'great hero', adding that he would not be surprised if the new ruler were to model his own career on that of Nader.⁸⁸ Just as the early Qajar historiographers had exorcised previous Iranian regimes, including that of Nader, so the historians who came of age in the 1920s and 1930s followed the line of the new regime by decrying the stagnation, and especially the loss of land, their country had suffered because of the military weakness of the Qajars, which inevitably entailed a re-evaluation of the last ruler who had stood for a strong and independent Iran—Nader Shah. In the 1930s, as Reza Shah consolidated his power, military history and the single strong leader came to the fore to help create a usable past for a state-in-the-making, built on authoritarian foundations. For historians writing in the reign of Reza Shah and his centralising tendencies, Nader's military career acquired a heightened significance. Just like the current ruler of Iran, he had (re)established national unity. They incorporated Malcolm and his vindicating approach to Nader into their own imagining of him. 'Abbas Eqbal Ashtiyani, whose authoritative history of the country was written in the 1930s, set the tone for this with his description of Nader as a ruler who had served his country well until his Indian campaign, when cruelty and greed overtook him.⁸⁹ Another historian of the period, 'Ali Asghar Shamim, called Nader a political pragmatist and praised him for 'having expelled foreigners from the soil of Iran', adding that 'this why he had been "elected" to rule by the people at the plain of Moghan'—a reference to the 1736 gathering of notables which bestowed legitimacy on him.⁹⁰ Mahmud Mahmud

⁸³ National Archives, London, FO 248/1054, Meshed 1912, Sykes, Meshed diary ending 16 March 1912. For the larger story, see Rudi Matthee, 'Infidel aggression: the Russian assault on the shrine of Imam Reza in Mashhad, 30 March 1912', in *Russians in Iran 1800–1945: Ideology and Domination*, (eds) Rudi Matthee and Elena Andreeva (London, 2018), pp. 151–152.

⁸⁴ 'Qovay-ye jangi-ye Iran', *Kaveh* 1.4 (14 March 1916), p. 1.

⁸⁵ Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Paris (MAE), 1918–1929, Perse 18, Fernand Prévost, Tehran to Raymond Poincaré, Paris, 1 Feb. 1922, fols 12–14 (14).

⁸⁶ MAE, 1918–1929, Perse 18, Georges Ducrocq, 'Notes sur les derniers événements qui se sont déroulées en Azerbaïdjan (Perse) et le succès de Sardar Sepah', fols 24–29 (27).

⁸⁷ *Setareh-ye Iran*, 29 Jan. 1924, referred to and translated in MAE, 1918–1929, Perse 18, Maurice Dayet, Tehran to Raymond Poincaré, Paris, fols 148–151.

⁸⁸ Michael Zirinsky, 'Imperial power and dictatorship: Britain and the rise of Reza Shah, 1921–1926', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 24.4 (1992), p. 656.

⁸⁹ 'Abbas Eqbal Ashtiyani, *Tarikh-e mofassal-e Iran az sadr-e Eslam ta enqeraz-e Qajariyeh*, 5th edn (Tehran, n.d.), pp. 732–733.

⁹⁰ 'Ali Asghar Shamim, *Tarikh-e Iran dar qarn-e yazdahom va davazdahom-e hejri* (Tehran, 1937); cited in Vejdani, *Making History in Iran*, pp. 87, 93.

(1882–1965), a third prominent politician-historian of the time, portrayed Nader as a gift of God, one of the great men who had appeared on the scene following the collapse of the Safavids to rescue Iran from foreign domination and exploitation.⁹¹

In modern times, Nader has remained controversial, in the West as much as in Iran. To some, he was just an uncultured tribal chieftain who delivered the *coup de grâce* to the genius that was Safavid Iran. The Iranian-American scholar Hamid Dabashi, fired up with nostalgia about the (religious and especially philosophical) splendour of the Safavids at a moment when the Iranian people (*mellat*) might have trumped the state (*dowlat*) in their valiant, preternatural struggle against it, has little patience for Nader. He sees him as little more than a brutal warlord who, by proclaiming his tribal and nomadic form of rulership, crushed the legacy of the philosophical ‘School of Isfahan’ and ‘effectively buried—bone, body and spirit—the memory of the Safavid cosmopolitan Shi’ism and its effectively urbanized concoctions of public space...’.⁹² A more balanced account of Nader’s life and career, following Lockhart’s assessment, is found in Michael Axworthy’s rousing biography, which maintains that without Nader’s intervention, Iran’s fate would have been that of Poland in the eighteenth century—partial or even complete partition.⁹³ Abbas Amanat similarly sees redemptive elements in Nader’s record, from his efforts to recapture Iranian territory from the various invading forces to his ‘protonational’ policy of bypassing tribal levies by drafting village men into his army.⁹⁴ French-Iranian psychiatrist Foad Sabéran, by contrast, in his psychological biography of the warlord, finds nothing redeeming in Nader’s record. Nader, for him, was just a megalomaniacal ruler, paranoid and perverse, indifferent to human life, a tyrant whose path was littered with corpses and who destroyed cities instead of building any.⁹⁵

However, Nader remains a hero for many in modern Iran, where the great man, the one who keeps order and who can bring salvation by effecting the kind change that few are willing to take responsibility for, continues to loom large. As Ali Ansari puts it: ‘For many Iranians today, Nader’s military successes are justification in themselves and more than outweigh any brutalities that accompanied him.’⁹⁶ Under Shah Reza’s son, Mohammad Reza Shah (r. 1941–79), Nader Shah and his reign continued to be celebrated as one of the ‘thoughtful and valiant, rather than violent and ruthless’ kings in a long and glorious monarchical tradition. In 1959 his body was exhumed and reburied in a new tomb. And in 1967 the Malek Library published a new edition of the *Zafar-nameh* in celebration of the shah’s official coronation that year.⁹⁷

In the Islamic Republic, old impulses and new realities have combined to produce a deeply conspiracy-fuelled view of the world, one in which power is always manipulated behind the scenes—by foreigners and their domestic accomplices—and where Iran is forever the target of external powers seeking to weaken and subdue the country so as to take advantage of its wealth and resources. National and anti-imperialist history thus came to be twinned in modern Iranian historiography. Fired in this crucible, Nader Shah emerges not just as the strong patriotic warrior who kicked out the foreigners but as a full-fledged anti-imperialist.

⁹¹ Mahmud Mahmud, ‘Introduction’, in Adamiyat, *Amir Kabir va Iran*, 1st edn (Tehran, 1944), as quoted in ‘Ali Mohammad Tarafdari, *Melli-gera’i, tarikh-negari va shekl-giri-ye hoviyyat-e melli-ye novin dar Iran* (Tehran, 2018), pp. 227–228.

⁹² Hamid Dabashi, *Shi’ism: A Religion of Protest* (Cambridge, MA, 2011), p. 166.

⁹³ Axworthy, *Sword of Persia*, p. xv.

⁹⁴ Abbas Amanat, *Iran. A Modern History* (New Haven and London, 2017), pp. 142–152.

⁹⁵ Foad Sabéran, *Nader Chah ou la folie au pouvoir dans l’Iran du XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 2013), p. 130.

⁹⁶ Ali M. Ansari, *Iran. A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2014), p. 80.

⁹⁷ Robert Steele, *The Shah’s Imperial Celebrations of 1971. Nationalism, Culture and Politics in Late Pahlavi Iran* (London, 2021), pp. 88–89.

At least Iran's current high-school textbooks attempt to strike a balance in their portrayal of Nader Shah. In keeping with a virtual national consensus, these hail him as the warrior who drove out the foreign usurpers. Nevertheless, they do not omit to mention his Indian expedition and its bloody outcome, but, rather than ascribing the looting of the Mughal treasury to his rapaciousness, they refer to the need to collect money for his military ventures as a motivating factor.⁹⁸

For many Iranians Nader remains the valiant warrior who restored Iran's pride by driving out the foreigners—the Afghans, the Ottomans, and the Russians—who had occupied their country. It is true that, from a traditional Iranian—and wider Middle Eastern—hard-won perspective, 'disorder is much worse than tyranny', and that 'much is forgiven a ruthless leader if at least he can restore order'.⁹⁹ Yet Nader remains an awkward fit for those who adhere to the dominant paradigm in modern Iranian history writing, with its tendency to espouse a primordial nationalism that preaches an unbroken civilisational link between the Achaemenids and the Islamic Republic (or the Pahlavi regime for the more secular minded). The deeply ingrained notion that Iranian civilisation is one of 'givers' is hard to reconcile with the sheer brutality and the unmistakable imperialism of Nader's Indian campaign, which consequently, à la Malcolm, tends to be presented as an aberration in an otherwise brilliant career. A good example of this tendency is Sayyed Javad Tabataba'i, an influential public intellectual in today's Iran, who sees Nader as a figure whose genius could have halted and even reversed the decline that had set in with the Afghan onslaught and the fall of the Safavids. According to him, after uniting Iran, Nader might have done a lot to rebuild a great nation, if only he had cared about the welfare of the Iranian people. Instead, he lost his mind when he decided to invade India, and he even wasted the dividend of that campaign, a huge amount of treasure. Tabataba'i approvingly quotes Laurence Lockhart, Nader's main Western biographer, who calls Nader essentially a warrior, 'at his best when leading his army', adding that it would be 'idle to pretend that he was successful as a ruler'.¹⁰⁰

A related, slightly different, take on Nader Shah comes through in Abdo'l Hadi Ha'eri's important, albeit profoundly teleological, work on the encounter between Iran and the West, the main theme of which is that Iranians ignored both the lure and threat of the West, that in the early modern period they neither took full advantage of the technical and scientific advances the Europeans had to offer nor paid enough attention to their perniciously imperialist objectives and colonial schemes. Ha'eri includes Nader Shah in his lament about the feeble awareness Iranians in the post-Safavid period evinced about the rapidly changing world around them and the sinister designs of foreigners on their country. Nader, he argues, was too busy making war and thus did not take advantage of Western scientific and technological achievements and skills other than to seek European assistance in building a fleet—something the Safavids had never done. For all his military brilliance, he also had no eye for the imperialist shenanigans of the Europeans. This, Ha'eri submits, comes out in the ruler's overly friendly and rather naive attitude vis-à-vis the Western powers, the Russians, and especially the British. He offered the English East India Company reduced customs rates and sought their assistance in building naval capacity.¹⁰¹ Even his Indian expedition was to the advantage of the

⁹⁸ See *Tarikh-e Iran dar dowreh-ye eslami*. Dowreh-ye devvom-e amuzeshi-ye motavasset 1399/1400, pp. 70–72, at <http://chap.sch.ir> (accessed 3 February 2023). Thanks to Golnar Mehran for bringing this website to my attention.

⁹⁹ Ansari, *Iran*, p. 80.

¹⁰⁰ Sayyed Javad Tabataba'i, *Ta'ammoli dar bareh-ye Iran. Dibacheh-i bar nazariyeh-ye enhetat-e Iran* (Tehran, 2001), pp. 100–103.

¹⁰¹ 'Abd al-Hadi Ha'eri, *Nakhostin ruyaru'i-ha-ye andisheh-geran-e Iran ba du-ru'i-ye tamaddon-e burzhvazi-ye gharb* (Tehran, 1988), pp. 92–200. For Nader's efforts to build a navy with English assistance, see Willem Floor, 'The Iranian navy in the Gulf during the Eighteenth century', *Iranian Studies* 20.1 (1987), pp. 31–53; and Peter Good,

British. By bringing home fabulous wealth from his Delhi campaign, he increased business opportunities for them, acting as a Trojan horse, and by unlocking and weakening India he enabled the English to expand their influence and domination in the subcontinent.¹⁰²

Nader's life remains the stuff of nationalist legend in popular works as well. Nur Allah Larudi, the author of a recent potted history of Nader's career, describes him, in morbidly bombastic terms, as the saviour of the nation who descended from the heavens to rescue the dying corpse of Iran. The author skims over the bloodbath in Delhi, justifying it by referring to the fact that its inhabitants had revolted against the Iranians. Following Mohammad Kazem Marvi and many after him, he ascribes the madness and cruelty that followed the Indian campaign to stress caused by the rigours of a life in the saddle.¹⁰³

We come full circle in this genre when even his Indian campaign becomes part of a scheme concocted by foreigners. A particularly egregious example of such a bizarre reversal of realities is one H. M. Zavesh, the author of a book titled *Nakhostin kargozaran-e este'mar* (The First Agents of Imperialism). After lamenting Iran's weakness under the late Safavids, and the Afghan occupation of Iran as a foreign invasion, Zavesh presents Nader Shah as an emblem of a popular Iranian struggle for national liberation. Nader, he insists, could have rebuilt Iran. Yet he was oblivious to the currents of history, and thus proceeded in ways that only caused death and destruction—including his own. Partly responsible for this are the English in the person of a Russia Company agent by the name of John Elton, who was active in the southern Caspian Sea region in the early 1740s. Keen to explore trade opportunities for English merchants engaged in the transit trade via Russia, he was next lured into entering the service of Nader Shah, who enlisted Elton to help him set up a ship-building enterprise on the Caspian Sea. Nothing came of the scheme on account of logistical obstacles, an adverse natural environment, and, above all, Russian suspicions and anger which caused a disruption of trade links via their territory.¹⁰⁴ To Zavesh, Elton was less an entrepreneur who, despite pressure from the Russians and his original employer, the London Russia Company, remained in the employ of Nader Shah, than a British spy who was out to disrupt and destroy Russian-Iranian trade. To that end, he encouraged Nader Shah to build a fleet in the Caspian Sea. Elton was also, Zavesh adds for good measure, in part responsible for Nader's Indian campaign, for the Englishman filled his brain with a lust for the riches of the subcontinent that proved to be irresistible.¹⁰⁵

Conclusion

Nader Shah looms far larger in Iranian history than his ephemeral career would seem to warrant. He came out of obscurity like a thunderbolt, over a period of ten years engaged in various lightning (and ruinously expensive) campaigns, and died midway, murdered by his own retainers, having failed to consolidate his territorial gains. Yet, like many strongmen in history who destroyed more than they created, he left an outsized and enduring legacy.

Nader Shah indeed spoke to the imagination of all from the moment he burst onto the scene. As a leader who 'saved his people' and 'regenerated' his nation, he fully fits the

¹⁰² 'The East India Company and the foundation of Persian naval power in the Gulf under Nader Shah, 1734–47', in *The Dutch and English East India Companies*, (eds) Adam Clulow and Tristan Mostert (Amsterdam, 2019), pp. 211–235.

¹⁰³ Ha'iri, *Nakhostin ruyaru'i-ha*, pp. 196–197.

¹⁰⁴ Nur Allah Larudi, *Nader, Pesar-e shamshir* (Tehran, 2009), pp. 20, 162, 219.

¹⁰⁵ For Elton, see Lockhart, *Nadir Shah*, pp. 287–289.

¹⁰⁵ H. M. Zavosh, *Nakhostin kargozaran-e este'mar. Naqd va tahqiq dar tarikh-e mo'aser-e Iran* (Tehran, 1987), pp. 132–138.

mould of the charismatic leader, as discussed by David Bell in his study of George Washington, Napoleon Bonaparte, Toussaint Louverture, and Simón Bolívar.¹⁰⁶ That Nader's name does not even appear in Bell's study says more about the limited purview of modern Western history-writing than about Nader's stature in the world's eighteenth- and nineteenth-century collective imagination. Nader, after all, did not just hold an out-sized place in the imagination of his own countrymen as the formidable leader who erased the ignominious memory of the decline and fall of the Safavids. While still alive, he became a global phenomenon, through reporting marked by unprecedented immediacy, which led to sensational accounts of his prowess in the Western press. For Europeans, he was at once a familiar figure and an enigma, a conqueror from the East, a volcanic force but also a barbarian in an age in which reason and moderation were supposed to be in the ascendant. If, as an Oriental despot, he could never rise to the stature of Alexander as an emancipatory, let alone a modernising, force, at least he had thwarted the even more barbaric Afghans.¹⁰⁷

Nader's record, mythical, larger than life both in its expansiveness and its brutality, can be read as a palimpsest, a layered series of images of multiple world conquerors, from Alexander to Napoleon. Among the men on horseback, his closest analogue is indeed Napoleon, with whom he shared a humble background and surpassing military skills. Eighteenth-century Europeans, short on exemplary leaders, greatly admired Nader. Nineteenth-century Iranians, living in their own age of weak leaders, admired Napoleon, turning him into the European Nader. In modern times, Nader became the Asian Bonaparte, a status he retains in the Iranian imagination, where his name continues to appeal to the pan-Iranian sentiments of some and the anticlerical aspirations of others.¹⁰⁸

Conflicts of interest. None.

¹⁰⁶ David A. Bell, *Men on Horseback: The Power of Charisma in the Age of Revolution* (New York, 2020), p. 13.

¹⁰⁷ The first non-Western ruler to make the transition from Oriental despot to (semi)enlightened reformer in Western eyes would be Muhammad 'Ali, the Albanian warlord who ruled Egypt between 1804 and 1848. See Jean-François Figeac, 'Pour en finir avec le despotisme. L'image de Méhémet Ali dans l'opinion publique franco-Britannique', *Revue Historique* 694 (2020), pp. 105–133.

¹⁰⁸ Amanat, *Iran. A Modern History*, p. 142.

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