Ask any Iranian about the last one hundred years of his or her country’s history, and the story of Mossadegh and the British-led conspiracy that is believed to have brought him down is likely to top the list, or at least to come up very soon. What is more, and despite the descent of Great Britain to the rank of second-rate power in the wake of World War II, many Iranians, especially those of the older generation, continue to see perfidious British influence behind each and every negative event and development in their country. Rarely, if ever, is Russia’s historical role in Iran mentioned in the same manner and with comparable passion.

This is odd. After all, in terms of sheer impact and certainly in terms of military operations, violence, casualties, property damage, and above all, loss of territory inflicted on Iran, there is no comparison between these two countries: Beginning with Tsar Peter’s invasion of Talesh and Gilan in 1721, the story of Russia’s treatment of Iran is a long, sad tale of brazen political interference, (mostly) unprovoked military invasion, and territorial annexation, much of it accompanied by a great deal of violence. The Russian imperialist thrust gained lasting momentum in the early nineteenth century, when the tsarist regime annexed a vast swath of land comprising Armenia and Georgia that had been held by the Iranians since Safavid times. Russia continued to put considerable pressure on Iran and occasionally engaged in great brutality on Iranian soil. It did so all the way to the time of the events during and immediately following the Second World War, when the Soviet Union, having set up puppet republics in Azerbaijan and Kurdistan, initially refused to honor the agreement to evacuate Iranian territory within six months after the cessation of hostilities.
Nothing the British ever did to Iran and its inhabitants is comparable in intent, method, or effect. Of course, London and Calcutta exerted pressure and sought influence, schemed, bullied, and threatened, and the British were instrumental in Iran’s loss of Herat in the mid-nineteenth century—preventing it from falling to the Russians. But they sent armies to the Persian Gulf only twice (in the context of threats to Herat), occupying the isle of Kharg from 1838 to 1842 and carrying out a more extensive expedition on Iranian soil in 1856, which however did not go beyond the port of Bushehr and nearby Borazjun.

Why England is more reviled and looked at with suspicion in Iran than Rus-e manbus, ominous Russia, is a complex issue. This essay does not claim to provide a full answer to this question; an investigation of that nature would require a (much-needed) book-length examination of the reverberations of the Russian Revolution of 1917 on Iran and its inhabitants, and especially an elaborate analysis of the reception of Marxism-Leninism and of the development of leftist thought among Iran’s urban elite. It would further necessitate a thorough exploration of the fraught relationship between the Soviet Union and Pahlavi Iran. What follows merely sets out to chart the historical terrain preceding the events of 1917. I will offer some suggestions for an answer to the question about the glaring discrepancy in the Iranian reaction to the British and the Russians, respectively, by looking at the ways Iranians have viewed their northern neighbors over the last two hundred years—based on an admittedly limited array of Persian and non-Persian-language sources. The focus will be on the period beginning with the ascent of the Qajars at the turn of the nineteenth century until the period of the Constitutional Revolution in Iran, 1905 to 1911 and its immediate aftermath.

**Antecedents**

Iran and Russia have a long history of interaction involving diplomacy and trade, and, since the early eighteenth century, military aggression and invasion. The Safavid period saw intensified interaction between Iranians and Russians, involving commerce as well as diplomacy. Commercial ties had long linked north and south but grew in intensity after 1604, when Shah Abbas I (r. 1587–1629) settled a large number of Armenians from their homeland on the Aras River to his newly created capital Isfahan, where he built a suburb for them and gave them commercial rights. The same ruler became increasingly interested in Muscovy as a growing power, especially after the cessation of the so-called Time of Troubles, the tumultuous period of famine, insurrection, and lawlessness in Russia that ended with the accession of the Romanov Dynasty in 1613. Shah Abbas alone dispatched at least 15 missions to Moscow combining commercial and diplomatic mandates—the latter typically revolving around the issue of respective spheres of influence in the Caucasus and, to a lesser extent, suggestions for joint action against the Ottomans. The Russians reciprocated, sending no fewer than ten missions to the Safavid court in the period between 1598 and 1618, responding to Safavid appeals for military assistance against the Turks and seeking protection for their merchants in northern Iran. Contacts waned under Shah Abbas’s successors, who gave up on his efforts to build an anti-Ottoman coalition and retreated from the activist foreign policy animated by these efforts. Within a decade they had made peace with Iran’s most redoubtable enemy, the Ottoman Empire, thus obviating the urgency to seek a