Invaders and Occupiers

Dismiss from your mind any idea of a generous policy towards the Germans to please the Persians or anyone else. (Winston Churchill)¹

Our object should be to make the Persians keep each other quiet while we get on with the war. (Winston Churchill)²

Germany secured ‘uncontested supremacy’ in Persia in four areas: in communications, in industrial investment (in tandem with Reza Shah’s policy of industrial expansion), in trade (between 1933 and 1941 German–Persian trade increased almost ninefold), and in cultural and political penetration.³ The final stage of the ‘master plan’ – the absorption of Persia into Germany’s military sphere – was of course pre-empted by the Allied invasion of the country in August 1941. Any suggestion that the Anglo-Soviet operation was an avoidable, egregious violation of a neutral state fails to take into account the fact that the Germans were poised to complete this fourth stage of their plan when the Allies carried out a pre-emptive strike: they invaded Persia and expelled the German expatriate colony. London and Moscow really had no choice. The German presence in Persia, astride the lines of communication between the British Middle East and British India, and immediately to the rear of the Red Army in Transcaucasia, was politically provocative and strategically unacceptable: invasion was inevitable.

One month before the Allied invasion, there was nothing tentative or apologetic about the categorical strategy formulated by the British War Cabinet Joint Planning Staff in response to Operation BARBAROSSA and the threat the Germans now posed to the security of the Middle East
and the British lines of communication east of Suez. According to the War Cabinet minutes, ‘The loss of our position in the Middle East would be a disaster of the first magnitude. ... the political effect, especially in the Moslem world, would be grave.’ But consequences even more dangerous to the war effort might have resulted. If the Axis were to have obtained access to the Indian Ocean for their naval forces, the effect on vital British communications in that area would have been disastrous, while Persian oil and the Abadan refinery were of course essential to the British cause. Britain’s position in the Middle East at the time afforded a defence in depth to the shores of the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf. Even if British forces were able to withdraw without a crippling loss of men and materials, no other line could promise the same security for those vital interests.

In view of the gravity of the strategic situation, it is clear that the Allies had to act swiftly to buttress the northern flank of their defences and choke off potential German access to the Persian Gulf by occupying Persia. The decision reached jointly by Britain and the Soviet Union to invade Persia in August 1941 was not taken lightly by the Allies – especially Churchill and Eden. Yet it was of no real surprise to the Germans, who appear to have been resigned to its inevitability months before either the British or the Russians became committed to the idea. Schulze-Holthus in Tabriz even had prior knowledge of the intended entry of Russian troops and transmitted a signal to Tehran; according to him there was no reason whatever why the German colony should not have been fully prepared for the invasion.

There were three sound strategic reasons for the invasion (security of oil supply, security of the Lend-Lease route, and security of lines of communication) and one declared justification for it (the scale of the malevolent Nazi diaspora). This is not to say that these factors were in any way contradictory; however, the former undoubtedly played a more significant role in the joint decision-making process than the latter. According to Sir Reader Bullard, the British minister in Tehran, ‘the two Powers ... tried to induce the Shah to eject most of the non-official Germans, who constituted, we thought, a danger to his country as well as to us.’ If anyone had any serious objections at the time to what might have been perceived by propagandists – but not strategists – as the bulldog and the bear ganging up on the helpless peacock, then they had no time to voice them, for the joint Anglo-Soviet military operation was precisely planned, flawlessly executed, and over in a blink. One dissenting voice, for instance, was the British diplomat Oliver Harvey, who saw the invasion as an act of naked aggression and committed to