The Soviet Union and the Iranian revolution
Knowledge, ideology, and the end of modernization paradigms
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Publication date
2021

Citation for published version (APA):

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The SOVIET UNION and The IRANIAN REVOLUTION
Knowledge, Ideology, and the End of Modernization Paradigms

Dmitry ASINOVSKIY
THE SOVIET UNION AND THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION
KNOWLEDGE, IDEOLOGY, AND THE END OF MODERNIZATION PARADIGMS

Academisch Proefschrift

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctora
an de Universiteit van Amsterdam
op gezag van de Rector Magnificus
prof. dr. ir. K. I. J. Maex
ten overstaan van een door het College voor
Promoties ingestelde commissie,
in het openbaar te verdedigen
op dinsdag 14 december 2021, te 12.00 uur

door Dmitrii Leonidovich Asinovskii
geboren te Leningrad
Promotiecommissie

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Summary

The 1978-79 Iranian revolution shook one of the basic principles accepted by Cold War superpowers—the belief in social progress through modernization espoused by socialism as well as liberal capitalism. For Moscow and Washington, the revolution was above all an ideological challenge that analysts and decision-makers in both superpowers struggled to understand and incorporate into their worldview. This thesis examines the Soviet struggle to deal with this ideological challenge and frames the Soviet reaction to the Iranian revolution in the context of the global Cold War. It traces the way scholars, analysts, and policymakers in Moscow tried to make sense of events in Iran and how they ultimately had to revise their thinking on religion, regional geopolitics, and the superpower competition. This research engages three important historiographical discussions. First, it sheds new light on the role played by ideology in the Cold War international relations. Using the Iranian revolution as a case study, this thesis reveals the importance of the ideology as a worldview that in particular prevented the Soviet leadership from seeing the new religious regime of Iran as viable. Consequently it shows that the Iranian revolution revealed the limitations of the Soviet leadership’s worldview, and the way that worldview restricted the ability of the Soviet leadership to deal with new challenges. Second, this thesis examines the role of knowledge and its relation to ideology by studying the role of the Soviet expert community. While often marginalized in the decision-making process of the Brezhnev’s collective leadership, the expert community found new relevance as a result of the revolution. At the same time, that community was often blinded by its own ideological background and its reliance on Iranian
leftists for information. Third, this study contributes to recent debates on the role of religion in the Cold War. In the late 1970s-early 1980s religion was revived as an openly proclaimed ideological notion, and Iran here was among other examples of this revival. Along with the overall ideological challenge, the rise of religion as a political ideology was among the factors that contributed to the end of the Cold War by changing the way Soviet leaders and policymakers thought about world affairs.
De Iraanse revolutie van 1978-1979 bracht één van de basisprincipes die door de grootmachten tijdens de Koude Oorlog werden aanvaard, aan het wankelen — het geloof in sociale vooruitgang door modernisering, dat zowel door het socialisme als door het liberale kapitalisme omarmd werd. Deze revolutie was voor Moskou en Washington vooral een ideologische beproeving die analisten en beleidsmakers in beide grootmachten nauwelijks begrepen en moeite mee hadden om het in hun visie op de wereld te integreren. Deze dissertatie onderzoekt de strijd van de Sovjet-Unie om met deze ideologische uitdaging om te gaan en plaatst de reactie van de Sovjet-Unie op de Iraanse revolutie in de context van de wereldwijde Koude Oorlog. Aan de hand van dit onderzoek wordt nagegaan hoe geleerden, analisten en beleidsmakers in Moskou de gebeurtenissen in Iran probeerden te begrijpen en hoe zij uiteindelijk hun ideeën over religie, regionale geopolitiek en de concurrentie tussen supermachten moesten herzien. Dit onderzoek werpt een blik op drie belangrijke historiografische vraagstukken. Ten eerste werpt het een nieuw licht op de rol van ideologie met betrekking tot de internationale betrekkingen tijdens de Koude Oorlog. Met de Iraanse revolutie als casestudy toont deze dissertatie het belang aan van de ideologie als wereldbeeld dat met name de Sovjetleiders ervan weerhield het nieuwe religieuze regime van Iran als uitvoerbaar te beschouwen. Bijgevolg toont het aan dat de Iraanse revolutie wees op de beperkingen van hoe de Sovjetleiders naar de wereld keken en hoe die kijk op de wereld het vermogen van de Sovjetleiding beperkte om nieuwe uitdagingen het hoofd te bieden. Ten tweede onderzoekt deze dissertatie de rol van kennis en haar relatie tot ideologie door het bestuderen van de functie van de experts uit de Sovjet-Unie. De groep
experts, die vaak werden buitengesloten in het besluitvormingsproces van het collectieve leiderschap van Brezjnev, vonden een nieuwe rol van betekenis als gevolg van de revolutie. Anderzijds werd die gemeenschap vaak verblind door haar eigen ideologische achtergrond en haar afhankelijkheid van Iraanse linksgezinden inzake het vergaren van informatie. Ten derde draagt deze studie bij aan recente debatten over de rol van religie tijdens de Koude Oorlog. In de late jaren zeventig en vroege jaren tachtig werd religie nieuw leven ingeblazen als een openlijk uitgedragen ideologische gedachte en Iran behoorde hier tot één van de vele voorbeelden van deze heropleving. Samen met de algemene ideologische uitdaging was de opkomst van religie, als een politieke ideologie, medebepalend voor het einde van de Koude Oorlog, doordat het de manier veranderde waarop Sovjetleiders en beleidsmakers dachten over mondiaal aangelegenheden.
Acknowledgments

The history of this thesis started nine years ago when a business school graduate abandoned his perspective career for the passion for history that had always lived in him. This thesis could have never been written unless back then the admission committee of the Tel Aviv University believed in someone with no academic record in history. Thus I am eternally grateful to all the MAMES professors and staff who gave me the entry ticket to the profession of a historian and supported my first steps in it. My special gratitude goes to Meir Litvak, whose courses on Modern Middle East and Iran in the 20th century inspired me to dive into studying Iran.

While I started my career as a historian in Tel Aviv, I believe that I became one during my studies at the European University at Saint-Petersburg. There I got a chance to learn from people whose names I had previously seen only on the forefronts of books I had been reading. The unique atmosphere of academic freedom created by the professors and administration of the EUSP was essential for the work on this thesis to get under way. For over three years my studies and initial stages of this research were funded by the EUSP. Not only courses but also comments of Vladimir Lapin, Boris Kolonitskiy, Mikhail Krom, Alfrid Bustanov, Igal Halfin, Anatoly Pinsky to the first drafts of chapters for this thesis helped me to understand how to think, analyze and write as a historian. I am especially grateful to the at the time Deans of the EUSP department of history Sam Hirst and Julia Safronova who not only supported me intellectually but also allowed funding for my research and conference trips during my years at the EUSP.

However, this thesis could never become a real thing if not for my supervisors. There are no words to express my gratitude to Alexey Miller, who agreed to supervise me, despite my topic being far beyond his area of interests. It is only thanks to his wisdom, support and trust that I could
proudly get rid of the impostor syndrome and finish this thesis. Artemy Kalinovsky became my primary guide to the history of the global Cold War despite the fact that my initial cry for help distracted him from the holidays with his family. Artemy made the biggest contribution to bringing this research to a qualitatively new level. Artemy and Christian Noack helped me to join the Amsterdam School of Regional, Transregional, and European Studies at the University of Amsterdam and became ideal supervisors who were always there for me, even though we had to communicate online throughout most of our joint work.

A research project like this is always a journey in which one sometimes needs an advice on where to navigate. I was very lucky that during my journey I met so many knowledgeable scholars whose support was invaluable. Vladimir Bobrovnikov became my first guide to the IV RAN and pointed my attention to the Special Bulletins that became very important sources for this research. Lana Ravandi-Fadai helped me to become more familiar with the history of the IVAN and shared some of the materials that deepened my understanding of how the institute functioned. During the discussion at the FRRESH summer school amidst the beautiful Finnish nature Sari Autio-Sarasmo was the first to point out to me the richness of the ARAN collections for my research. Alexey Malashenko shared with me not only the important literature (including a very rare volume on Islam and Politics) but also his own unique memories from working along many of my protagonists. Sergey Radchenko was very generous to share with me some of his amazing findings at the RGANI Brezhnev collection. Mark Kramer advised me to go to Cambridge to work with the Mitrokhin archive, and this research trip was one of my biggest successes. Nina Mamedova and Mikhail Krutikhin were very kind to share with me their personal memories that served as a breakthrough for my understanding of many of my research objectives. The participants of discussions of parts of this work at conferences and summer schools in Cambridge, Vienna, Princeton, London, Budapest, Leeds, Reims, Moscow, Amsterdam and Saint-Petersburg all deserve a mention as in these discussion my understanding of my own topic was born. Roham Alvandi and Vlad Zubok are the
discussants I would like to specially mention as their advice and sometimes criticism motivated me to improve my research further and further.

Three months that I spent at Harvard in 2018, thanks to the generous funding of the EUSP, were especially fruitful and laid foundation for this research to truly become a valuable piece of scholarship. Apart from spending this time enjoying the riches of the Harvard libraries and uncountable public events, I was lucky to meet a number of great scholars, with whom even short conversations were immensely important for the development of this research. Among those that I found the most helpful were my conversations with Jeremy Friedman, Odd Arne Westad, Mark Kramer, Terry Martin and Chris Miller.

Thanks to the research funds of the EUSP and ARTES I never had troubles in organizing my research trips to the archives and libraries. In most of them I was lucky to meet great archivists and librarians who were always helpful and patient in working with my orders and unusual requests. I am especially grateful to the staff of RGANI, RGASPI, GARF, ARAN, Churchill College Archive, UK National Archives, National Library of Russia, Russian State Library, British Library and university libraries of the EUSP, UvA and Harvard.

Lastly I want to express my warmest gratitude to my family and friends who were helping me throughout the years of this research. I am especially thankful to those who provided me shelter during my countless trips and were politely spending with me their evenings sharing a pint despite being evidently bored with my endless stories about my archival findings. Anastasia Slutskina, Olga Ivanova and Alexey Tsypushkin—in Moscow, Inna and Leo Asinovski—in Boston, Katie Chizhova and Daniel Silbereisen—in London. Back home I was always surrounded with love and care from my mother, Elena Slutskina.

I dedicate this work to the loving memory of my grandmother, Isabella Slutskina, whose stories about her life were among things that motivated me to become a historian and study the history of the Soviet society.
Note on transliteration

In this thesis for transliteration from Russian and Persian I followed the transliteration tables generally used by the Library of Congress, with the following exceptions:

1. Names appear according to historical custom or customary use for the academic literature in English, as for example: Khrushchev (not Khrushchyov); Azerbaijan (not Azerbaidzhan); Nureddin Kianuri (not Nur al-Din Kianuri), etc.

2. For both Russian and Persian transliterations the diacritical marks are dropped.

3. Russian soft vowels such as ьо, я and ё are transliterated as yu (not iu), ya (not ia), yo (not ě). Vowel e is generally transliterated according to the LoC transliteration table (e) unless preceded by the letter ъ (soft sign), in which case it is transliterated as ye.

4. Russian letter ю is transliterated as y (not ĭ)

5. Russian letter й is generally transliterated as y unless it is followed by ю, in which case it is transliterated as i.

6. The endings of Russian male first and last names that end with уй are transliterated as y (not iy), as for example: Vasily (not Vasiliy), Ulyanovsky (not Ulyanovskiy), etc.