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The Soviet Union and the Iranian revolution

Knowledge, ideology, and the end of modernization paradigms

Asinovskii, D.L.

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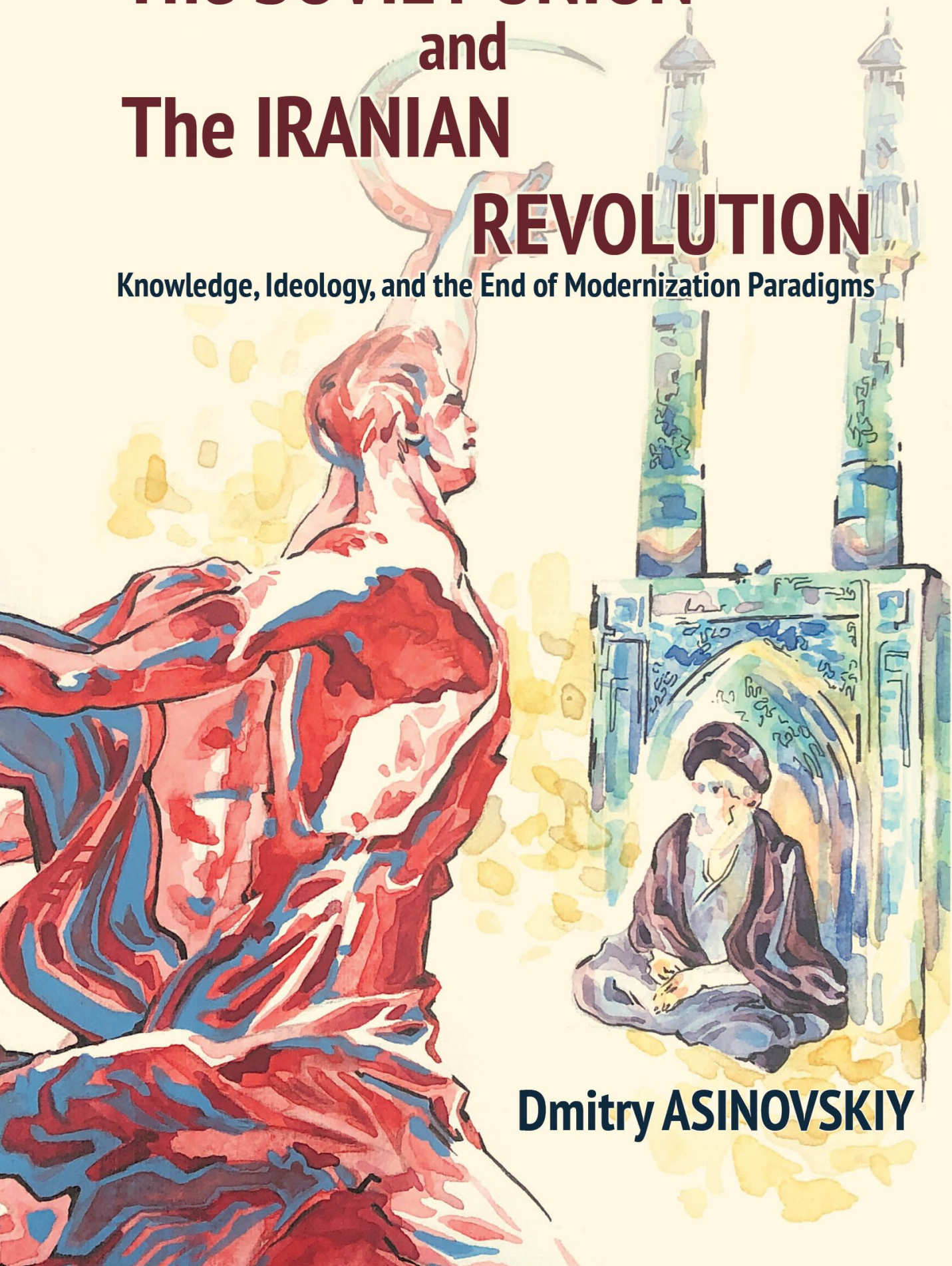
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The SOVIET UNION and The IRANIAN REVOLUTION

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

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Promotores:	dr. C. U. Noack prof. dr. A. I. Miller	Universiteit van Amsterdam European University at St. Petersburg
Copromotores:	dr. A. M. Kalinovsky	Universiteit van Amsterdam
Overige leden:	prof. dr. M. Kemper prof. dr. U. Ü. Üngör prof. dr. O. A. Westad prof. dr. G. R. van den Berg prof. dr. M. Lipkin dr. R. van Dijk	Universiteit van Amsterdam Universiteit van Amsterdam Yale University Universiteit Leiden Institute of World History of the Russian Academy of Sciences Universiteit van Amsterdam

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Summary

The Soviet Union and the Iranian revolution: Knowledge, Ideology, and the End of Modernization Paradigms.

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.

Samenvatting

De Sovjet-Unie en de Iraanse revolutie: kennis, ideologie en het einde van vernieuwende paradigma's.

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 mondiale aangelegenheden.

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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.

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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.

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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 *ю*, *я* and *ě* 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 *ь* (soft sign), in which case it is transliterated as *ye*.
4. Russian letter *ѳ* is transliterated as *y* (not *ř*)
5. Russian letter *ѣ* is generally transliterated as *y* unless it is followed by *ѳ*, in which case it is transliterated as *i*.
6. The endings of Russian male first and last names that end with *ѳѳ* are transliterated as *y* (not *iy*), as for example: Vasily (not Vasiliy), Ulyanovsky (not Ulyanovskiy), etc.