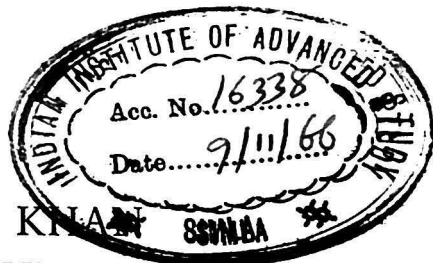


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AQA MOHAMMAD KHAN AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE QAJAR DYNASTY¹

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A century and a half after his assassination the memory of the eunuch Shah of Iran, Aqa Mohammad Khan Qajar, continues to be execrated as one of the most brutal and bloodthirsty of Oriental rulers. Nevertheless, despite the gruesome tales associated with his name, Aqa Mohammad was a figure of very considerable importance in the history of Iran. He was one of Iran's great military commanders as well as being the last of the great conquerors of Central Asia, basing his power upon tribal material such as Chingiz Khan, Timur, Babur, Nadir Shah and Ahmad Shah Durani had utilized before him. In 1794 he established the dynasty which was to rule Iran until 1925 during the period when Iran was first introduced to the dangers of Great Power rivalry in the Middle East and when the painful process of Westernization was initiated. It was partly due to the ruthlessness with which Aqa Mohammad placed his family on the Peacock Throne and with which he imposed order on a country torn by civil war and foreign invasion for more than half a century that Iran managed to survive into the twentieth century as an independent monarchy and without colonial status. In the article which follows a brief account is given of Aqa Mohammad's rise to power amid the distracted conditions of late eighteenth century Iran, together with the verdict that the time has now come when his career can be examined with more objectivity than in the past.

BY the close of the eighteenth century Iran had endured a series of political upheavals which seemed to foreshadow the disintegration of the Iranian state. During the long and tragic reign of Shah Sultan Husayn (1694-1722) the Safavi dynasty tottered helplessly towards its downfall, while Russia and Ottoman Turkey waited to feed upon the carrion. The final *coup de grace* was administered by the Afghan Ghilzai adventurer, Mahmud, who in 1722 captured the Safavi capital of Isfahan and established a short-lived dynasty which collapsed before the military genius of Nadir Shah. Nadir overthrew all his rivals for the throne, and as a superb leader of irregular cavalry beat back the Turks in the west and the Uzbeks in the north, absorbed Afghanistan and the Punjab into his kingdom, and in 1739 sacked Delhi. From these spectacular conquests Iran derived few benefits, and to serve her master's ambitions she was bled white of men, money and resources. Fiscal oppression bred rebellion, which was suppressed with terrible ferocity. Eventually, in 1747, Nadir's



career was brought to a violent end by assassination. His extensive empire disintegrated immediately, and it was left for the strongest and most ruthless to win his heritage.

The eastern part of Nadir's empire was won by an Afghan soldier of fortune, Ahmad Shah Durrani, the maker of modern Afghanistan. In the far north-west another Afghan, Azad Khan, became master of Azarbaijan. At Mashhad the feeble grandson of Nadir, Shah Rukh, reigned but did not rule over the fertile province of Khorasan where local chieftains exercised virtual independence. Elsewhere tribal leaders asserted their individual authority. In the countryside around Isfahan power lay with the Bakhtiari chieftain, Ali Mardan Khan, while in Shiraz another tribal leader, Karim Khan Zand, established his local supremacy with the support of the Laks.

In one remote area of Iran the struggle among the successors of Nadir found no echo. On the north-eastern shores of the Caspian in the province of Gorgan the leaders of the Qajar tribe were consolidating their position, protected by the Elburz mountains from the disturbances on the central plateau. The Qajars were a Turkish tribe long settled in Iran. Fearing their growing power Shah Abbas had divided the tribe into three sections, which he settled in Merv, Karabagh and Gorgan respectively. The leadership of the divided tribe passed to the Gorgan branch early in the eighteenth century when Fath Ali Khan became the commander-in-chief of Shah Sultan Husayn's son, Tahmasp. Fath Ali Khan was assassinated by Nadir, but after the latter's death Mohammad Husayn Khan, Fath Ali Khan's son and heir, immediately declared his independence, drove back an invading Afghan army from the Caspian provinces, and proceeded to convert his Qajar followers, bitterly divided among themselves, into an effective military weapon by means of which he made himself master of Gilan, Mazandaran and Gorgan.

The events which followed the death of Nadir Shah had left the Iranian people as the helpless pawn of military adventurers engaged in a ruthless struggle for power, but during the 1750s there were signs of peace returning. Between 1750 and 1779 Karim Khan Zand gained control over the greater part of Iran, winning over his Bakhtiari rivals, repelling the Afghans, and even finding strength to attack the vulnerable Turkish port of Basra. Assuming the title of *Vakil* and modestly disclaiming the title of *Shahanshah*, Karim Khan presided over a brief national revival in which trade began to return and some degree of public order was restored. The fine buildings with which he embellished Shiraz survive to the present time as monuments of an age to which later generations looked back with genuine regret.

Among Karim Khan's rivals none had been more formidable than Mohammad Husayn Khan Qajar, who in 1758 had actually penetrated as far south as the valley of Shiraz, though he had been forced to withdraw as a result of Karim Khan's diplomacy with rival Qajar leaders. His assassination by one of those rivals resulted in his heir, Aqa Mohammad, being sent as a hostage to Shiraz and in one of his daughters being placed in the *Vakil's* harem. The details of Aqa Mohammad's early life are uncertain, but he appears to have been born around 1734.² As a child he fell

into the hands of Nadir's nephew, Adil Shah, who castrated him, and this event may be assumed to have moulded his subsequent character and behaviour, as did his long captivity in Shiraz. Not that Karim Khan was other than a chivalrous gaoler: the Qajar was allowed the maximum freedom and, since Karim Khan soon recognized his captive's astute mind, Aqa Mohammad was frequently summoned into the presence of the *Vakil* who consulted him on affairs of state, calling him "Piran Visa," the name of the famous vizier of the legendary king Afrasiab. In after years Aqa Mohammad recalled how he used to sit on the floor of Karim Khan's audience chamber surreptitiously slashing the priceless carpets beneath him, acts of spitefulness he much regretted when the loot of Shiraz passed into his own hands.³

In 1779 the death of Karim Khan ended the long exile. Through his sister in Karim Khan's harem Aqa Mohammad received the news of the *Vakil's* death immediately and promptly escaped from Shiraz, riding without pause until he was safe in Gorgan. He was now the undisputed head of the Qajar tribe, and with a combination of patience and cunning he set himself the task of consolidating his position, healing the dissensions which had weakened the tribe since his father's death, and reasserting Qajar authority over Mazandaran and Gilan. He had returned to his tribe matured by his long captivity and possessing an intimate knowledge of the character and feuds of the principal members of the Zand family.

Meanwhile, in the south, the peace which Karim Khan had maintained soon vanished in the fratricidal struggle which followed his death. Several of the Zand chieftains were men of commanding talent, but their rival ambitions inevitably weakened the pre-eminence of the Zand family and played into the hands of their Qajar rival. Finally, in 1785, Ja'far Khan, Karim Khan's nephew, overthrew all opponents and became master of Shiraz. North of Fars, however, his authority was purely nominal, for Aqa Mohammad had extended his influence far south of the Elburz and on one occasion, having defeated Ja'far Khan in pitched battle at Yazdikhast, had compelled the latter to withdraw behind the impregnable walls with which Karim had ringed Shiraz. In 1789 Ja'far Khan was poisoned by members of his own entourage. His son, Lotf Ali Khan, was already *Beglarbeg* or Viceroy of Fars and Governor of Shiraz. At the time of his father's assassination he was in the Kirman province and, temporarily weakened by the conspiracy in Shiraz, he fled to the Dashtistan, the hinterland north of Bushire, where he raised an army to regain the Zand capital. Marching on Shiraz he rapidly took possession of all his father's kingdom.

With the accession of Lotf Ali Khan, the last ruler of the Zand dynasty, the protracted dual between the Zands and the Qajars entered its final, and most tragic, phase. The contrast between the rival leaders could hardly have been more striking. Aqa Mohammad was in his middle fifties and his appearance was anything but agreeable. Sir John Malcolm, who visited Iran four years after his death and associated with several of the late king's ministers, obtained the following description:

"The person of this monarch was so slender, that, at a distance, he appeared like a youth of fourteen or fifteen. His beardless and

shrivelled face resembled that of an aged and wrinkled woman; and the expression of his countenance, at no time pleasant, was horrible when clouded, as it very often was, with indignation."⁴

His personality was widely known and dreaded. Greed and vindictiveness were two dominant passions, though he was capable of subordinating both to his overriding love of power. Through years of adversity he had proved himself a master of dissimulation and a clear-sighted, ruthless statesman. His talents as a general were very considerable and were rightly respected. William Francklin, an officer of the East India Company's Army who was staying in Shiraz in the last years of Ja'far Khan's reign, noted of Aqa Mohammad that :

"It is remarkable, that from his first entering into a competition for the government, he has been successful in every battle which he has fought. He . . . possesses great personal bravery."⁵

By 1789 he was not only master of Gorgan, Mazandaran and Gilan, but his authority was also recognized in Tabriz, Hamadan, Tehran and Isfahan.

Lotf Ali Khan was the complete antithesis of his rival, being extremely handsome as well as courteous and generous in his manner. When his father died he was less than twenty, and at the time of his own death he was under twenty-five. A chivalrous fighter and an inspired leader in guerilla warfare Lotf Ali Khan soon became a hero of ballads and legends.⁶ His failings, however, were dangerous ones, for he could be haughty and imperious, impetuous and cruel, and he made little effort to conciliate opponents. Europeans likened him to Charles XII of Sweden. With the Shirazis, who loathed the Qajars without reservation, he was justly popular for his princely magnanimity. At the time of his succession he was master of Fars and the country to the west around Shushtar and received tribute from Yazd, Kerman, Lar and Bushire. He therefore controlled what was, at that period, probably the richest part of Iran, the south having suffered less than the north from the ravages of war following the fall of the Safavis. The Zand army, however, was far smaller than that of the Qajars and probably numbered little more than 20,000 men, mainly cavalry.

Lotf Ali Khan had not long regained his patrimony before Aqa Mohammad marched south to challenge his authority. In their first conflict Lotf Ali Khan came near to defeating his experienced rival, but the defection of part of his army compelled him to withdraw behind the walls of Shiraz, where Aqa Mohammad besieged him for three months in a desultory fashion before returning northwards to winter in Tehran.

In the following year, 1790, Aqa Mohammad left his rival undisturbed and Lotf Ali Khan took advantage of this temporary respite to march on Kerman, which he besieged unsuccessfully. In 1791 he turned northwards in an attempt to regain Isfahan where circumstances seemed to favour a revival of Zand influence. But at that moment a new and decisive factor entered the situation in the person of Hajji Ibrahim, the *Kalantar* of

Shiraz. Hajji Ibrahim's family had long held high administrative office in Shiraz and Hajji Ibrahim himself had been a loyal supporter of Ja'far Khan and one of the principal instruments by which Lotf Ali Khan had obtained his father's throne. By 1791, however, Hajji Ibrahim had determined to overthrow his master. His motives may have been simply ones of treachery and ambition common to the age, but he told Sir John Malcolm, who was his guest in Tehran in 1800, that Lotf Ali Khan had slighted him in such a manner that he could no longer trust him.⁷ His action certainly seems incomprehensible if he intended no more than to substitute Aqa Mohammad for Lotf Ali Khan. Probably Sir Harford Jones, who was in Shiraz as a young merchant at the time of Hajji Ibrahim's *coup*, was nearer the mark when he declared that Hajji Ibrahim intended to compete for the supreme power but was prevented from doing so by errors in his calculations, the recuperative capacity of Lotf Ali Khan, and the superior military might of Aqa Mohammad.⁸ In its initial stage, however, Hajji Ibrahim's plot was well laid. As soon as Lotf Ali Khan had left Shiraz on the road for Isfahan he seized the citadel of Shiraz and imprisoned in it the families of all the principal supporters of the Zands. Simultaneously, his brother was to ambush Lotf Ali Khan and murder him. This part of the plot failed completely, and Lotf Ali Khan hurriedly returned to Shiraz, only to discover that his supporters immediately abandoned him when they learnt that their families were in the hands of Hajji Ibrahim. Accompanied by less than a dozen servants, Lotf Ali Khan fled to Kazerun and thence to the Dashtistan where his name soon drew men to him and whence he led a series of daring raids on the Fars countryside. Hajji Ibrahim was no match for such generalship as Lotf Ali Khan now displayed and he was compelled to call upon the Qajars for assistance, assuring Aqa Mohammad that he had only overthrown Lotf Ali Khan in order to establish the Qajar family upon the throne. Twice Aqa Mohammad sent armies to aid Hajji Ibrahim and twice Lotf Ali Khan defeated them. In 1792 Aqa Mohammad took the field in person, but was almost taken prisoner by Lotf Ali Khan in a bold night attack which was only foiled by the treachery of one of Lotf Ali's own followers.

Overawed by the sheer size of Aqa Mohammad's forces, Lotf Ali Khan thereafter fled eastwards into that remote area of desert which surrounds the cities of Yazd, Kerman and Tabas, where he survived throughout 1793 as a brigand chieftain. In 1794, however, he captured Kerman and as Kerman was still, at that time, a city of considerable importance it seemed as if there was a prospect of a revival of Zand fortunes. Aqa Mohammad therefore immediately marched on Kerman while Lotf Ali Khan hastened to put the city's fortifications in order. The walls had long been derelict, yet even under such unfavourable circumstances Lotf Ali Khan held out for four months until the Qajars were admitted into the city by treachery.⁹ Making a daring escape through the enemy lines he fled to Bam, a hundred miles eastwards on the road to Qandahar, where he believed he had friends. Once again he found himself betrayed, and as he was endeavouring to make his escape from the citadel his horse was ham-strung under him and he himself was cut down after a desperate struggle. Brought

before Aqa Mohammad, his eyes were torn from their sockets (tradition relates that Aqa Mohammad himself performed this operation), and he was then exposed to such bestial tortures that contemporary European travellers in Iran refrain from describing them. Finally, he was taken to Tehran and there strangled. Nevertheless, Aqa Mohammad so admired his rival's courage that, on hearing that several sons had been born in one night to his nephew, Baba Khan (the future Fath Ali Shah), he remarked: "May God grant that one of them may resemble Lotf Ali Khan!" The remaining members of the Zand family were either massacred or enslaved. Lotf Ali Khan's infant son, whom Harford Jones had played with in the palace garden of Shiraz, was castrated. Nearly twenty years later Harford Jones met him again in Azarbayjan—"himself a shrivelled eunuch, and a slave; myself the accredited Minister of my country, to the successor of the destroyer of his father's house and throne!"¹⁰

But the vengeance of Aqa Mohammad extended further than the family of his defeated opponent. Shiraz, the centre of Zand influence, was inevitably marked for punishment. Her impregnable walls were destroyed; many of her buildings suffered permanent damage; and the Lak quarter was depopulated.¹¹ The commercial and manufacturing activities of the city declined in consequence. The body of Karim Khan Zand was transferred from Shiraz to Tehran and was there placed beneath the threshold of the palace so that Aqa Mohammad could enjoy the daily satisfaction of desecrating the body of the great foe of his house. Kerman was systematically ravaged for three months. Twenty thousand women and children were handed over to the army or sold as slaves. For the male population a different punishment was reserved and tradition relates that 7,000 eyes were brought to the conqueror, who personally counted them, informing the officer in charge of the operation: "Had one been missing, yours would have been taken!" As a memorial to the downfall of the Zand dynasty a pyramid of skulls was erected in Bam on the spot where Lotf Ali Khan had been captured. Six hundred prisoners were executed in Kerman and their heads were carried to Bam by a further three hundred who were decapitated when they reached their destination. According to Henry Pottinger this monument was still standing in 1810.¹² As for the province of Kerman, it has never recovered from the Qajar fury,¹³ while it is only in the twentieth century that Shiraz has once more taken its traditional place among the leading cities of Iran.

The protracted dual between the Qajars and Zands for mastery of Iran is of interest in being the last example of how dynasties in Iran have established themselves over their rivals, generally with tribal support. The struggle for power which ended with Aqa Mohammad's triumph in 1794 had two enduring effects. First, the long series of civil wars disastrously retarded the internal development of the country. In most provinces the frequent passage of armies and the prevailing insecurity greatly depressed trade and the trading classes. In certain districts there was a decline in the area of cultivation and consequently in population. Secondly, during the long period when the candidates for the throne were fighting each other they were unable to protect the external frontiers of Iran, where traditional enemies were ready to take advantage of Iran's internal divisions. Although

Aqa Mohammad's ambition had long been apparent, so long as Lotf Ali Khan was alive Kerman, Fars and Khuzestan had been independent of Qajar control. With the death of Lotf Ali Khan Aqa Mohammad became the actual ruler of the greater part of the Iranian plateau and he was able to turn his attention to the two pressing problems of internal security and of Iran's relations with her neighbours. Of these two, the latter was the most urgent.

In 1794 Iran was encircled by states eager to profit by her obvious weakness. In the east Afghanistan under the declining Durrani dynasty still represented a serious threat to Iran's territorial integrity. In 1793, Zaman Shah, the grandson of Ahmad Shah Durrani, had fought his way to the Afghan throne. He was a man of ambition and considerable energy and would have been a most formidable rival to the Qajar chieftain if he had not been obsessed by the impracticable desire to regain his grandfather's conquests in India.¹⁴ Even so, Afghanistan exercised a virtual protectorate over the province of Khorasan, where the blind Shah Rukh was an Afghan puppet, and in 1794 it would have been rash to prophesy that Khorasan would remain part of Iran indefinitely. North of Khorasan lay the khanates of Khiva and Bukhara, two weak but rapacious states which were always ready to commit acts of brigandage even if they lacked the strength to do permanent damage.¹⁵ More troublesome than these were the Turkoman tribes east of the Caspian who were nominally under the Khan of Khiva but were in fact independent. Apart from nomadic agriculture their most lucrative occupation was the kidnapping of Persians for the great slave-emporium of Khiva, and not only Gorgan and Khorasan but even provinces deep in the interior of Iran were liable to suffer from their raids. Not until the Russian conquest of Khiva in 1873 and the massacre of the Turkomans by Skobelev at Geok Tepe in 1881 was Iran freed from this scourge.

In the Caucasus, beyond her own vassal khanates, Iran's immediate neighbour was the ancient Christian kingdom of Georgia. Under the early Safavi rulers of the sixteenth century the kings of Georgia had been the vassals of the Shahs of Iran, but in the period which followed the death of Nadir Shah in 1747 Georgia had recovered her independence. In the second half of the eighteenth century her attitude towards her two Muslim neighbours, Iran and Turkey, was determined by the steady advance of Russia into the Caucasus. Between 1719 and 1721 Carl van Verden had surveyed the Caspian for Peter the Great who in 1722 marched into Daghestan and seized the great forts of Derbend and Baku. Peter's scheme for making the Caspian a Russian lake came to nothing, for Nadir Shah easily recaptured Derbend and Baku, but a conscious policy of aggression had been initiated in the Caucasus and Catherine II proceeded to develop it as part of her policy for extending Russian power and influence in the Middle East. This coincided with the resurgence of an independent Georgia under Erekle II (1744-98). Erekle was well aware that Georgia by herself could not survive a revival of Iran's former military predominance in the area and, in preparation for such an event, he signed a treaty with Russia in which Georgia severed for ever her links with Iran and her king became the vassal of the Russian Tsar. Catherine, for her part, bound herself to

protect Erekle and to guarantee him not only his kingdom but also all territories which he might subsequently acquire. This treaty was signed in 1783, in which year two Russian battalions and four guns penetrated through the mountains to Tiflis, the Georgian capital, where they were prematurely acclaimed as heralding a brighter future for the Christian population of the Caucasus. Unquestionably, Georgia had become a Russian protectorate and, in view of the hostility of the Christian Georgians for their Muslim neighbours, the spear-head for Russian penetration southwards.¹⁶

The longest stretch of Iran's frontier faced the Turkish provinces of Armenia and Mesopotamia. The Ottoman Turks, being Sunnis, were the traditional enemies of Shia Iran, and in the reign of Nadir Shah the old feud had been vigorously prosecuted. But since Karim Khan Zand's abortive attack upon Basra relations between the Turkish Pashas of Baghdad and successive rulers on the Iranian plateau had been, for the most part, cordial. It was a fortunate coincidence for the Qajars that during the period when Aqa Mohammad was fighting his way to the throne the Sublime Porte was preoccupied with Russian aggression.

Following the destruction of Lotf Ali Khan, Aqa Mohammad rightly recognized, in assessing priorities, that the situation in Georgia was the most dangerous. He had already come into contact with the Russians as early as 1780, when Count Voinovich appeared with a flotilla off the Mazandaran coast and requested permission to establish a Russian trading-post at Ashraf, the modern Behshahr. At first Aqa Mohammad granted this request but, subsequently becoming suspicious of Russian intentions, he forcibly expelled the party.¹⁷ Well aware of Russian encroachments in the Caucasus, he had been compelled to placate both Russians and Georgians during his dual with Lotf Ali Khan, but after 1794 he felt himself in a position to reassert Iran's former overlordship in Georgia. Speed and secrecy were of prime consideration if Georgia was to be chastized before General Gudovich, the Russian Commander in the Caucasus, could intervene. The army returning from Kerman was assembled at Tehran early in 1795, and in April Aqa Mohammad led his forces to the north-west frontier. The exact size of his army is uncertain. Malcolm was informed that it numbered 60,000 men, but Olivier, one of the envoys of the French Republic, placed it at 80,000.¹⁸ At Ardabil the army was divided into three corps. The first advanced through the Moghan steppe against the chieftains of Shirvan and Dagestan. The second, led by Aqa Mohammad, advanced on the fortress of Shusha in Karabagh across the Aras. The third advanced on Erivan, the capital of Armenia. Even during the brilliant campaigns of Nadir Shah the principal weakness of the Iranian army had always been the lack of effective artillery and siege-equipment, and this weakness had not been repaired by the end of the eighteenth century. Hence Aqa Mohammad made no headway in besieging Shusha, which was governed by his bitter enemy Ibrahim Khalil Khan, and he therefore moved west to join the third corps in front of Erivan, leaving a token force in the Shusha district. Erivan itself was virtually impregnable and, having no means of taking it, he once again left part of his army nominally investing it and marched for Ganja where he was joined by the first corps

returning from a victorious march through Dagestan. From Ganja the Iranian army, now numbering perhaps 40,000 men, advanced towards Tiflis. Leaving the security of his mountain fortresses, Erekle unwisely advanced to meet the invaders with an army a quarter of the size of the Iranian forces. The battle which followed was long and savage. "Never do I remember my foes to have fought so valiantly," declared Aqa Mohammad. But the issue was never really in doubt. The Georgian survivors, together with their king and some refugees from Tiflis, fled into the mountains and the Persians entered the capital unopposed. The city was systematically pillaged and burnt, and the citadel demolished. Fifteen thousand young Georgians, male and female, were enslaved, but the remainder of the population was massacred as an example of the punishment future rebels would receive and—in the words of a contemporary Persian chronicler—in order to give "the unbelievers of Georgia a specimen of what they were to expect on the day of judgment."¹⁹ Hearing the news of the sack of Tiflis Erivan promptly surrendered, but Shusha remained recalcitrant. Aqa Mohammad soon withdrew from Tiflis and, sacking Shamakhi *en route*, retired to the Moghan steppe where he passed the winter and where, in 1796, he was crowned *Shahanshah*. He had been unwilling to perform the ceremony so long as the Iranian kingdom was divided among rival rulers or under the control of neighbouring states and for this reason he modestly refused to wear the four-plumed crown of Nadir which symbolized rule over Iran, Turkestan, Afghanistan and India. The crown of Aqa Mohammad can be seen today in the Gulestan Palace, Tehran. It is a heavy, helmet-like crown made of copper and painted with simple designs. As a devout and superstitious Muslim he may have had inhibitions about assuming the royal office which in Islam, as in Byzantium, was forbidden to the mutilated. Nevertheless, following his coronation, he was girded with the sacred sword of the Safavis at Ardabil.

His supremacy now visibly asserted by his conquest of Georgia and by his coronation, Aqa Mohammad proceeded to Tehran to make preparations for the next stage in restoring the former unity of the kingdom. In Khorasan the blind grandson of Nadir Shah still reigned as an Afghan puppet. Announcing that he intended to make a pilgrimage to the shrine of the Eighth Imam at Mashhad, Aqa Mohammad set off with his army for Khorasan, marching through Gorgan on his way and savagely chastizing the marauding Turkomans. In Khorasan itself he met with no resistance and his entry into Sabzavar, Nishapur and Mashhad was a triumphal progress. The independent chieftains of the province made immediate submission; Shah Rukh's sons fled to Afghanistan; and Shah Rukh himself prepared to receive his dangerous guest. He was known to possess many of the finest jewels which Nadir had obtained from the sack of Delhi and on the acquisition of these Aqa Mohammad, who had an obsession for gems, had set his heart. Shah Rukh was therefore tortured until he had disgorged every stone from its secret hiding-place. He was then despatched to Tehran, but he died from his wounds on the journey at Damghan, where his tomb still stands. Apart from his atrocious treatment of Shah Rukh, Aqa Mohammad's invasion of Khorasan came as a

blessing to that much-ravaged province, for it imposed order on a countryside notorious for its lawlessness and expecting an imminent invasion by Afghans and Uzbeks. Aqa Mohammad garrisoned Mashhad with 12,000 troops and sent missions to the ruler of Bukhara and to Zaman Shah of Afghanistan. To the former he sent an insolent message demanding the release of Persian prisoners and an end of border raiding. To Zaman Shah he sent a request for the cession of Balkh in anticipation of a Persian invasion of Bukhara which was planned for the following year. But the news of a Russian invasion of Iran recalled him to Tehran in September, 1796. It was too late in the year to embark upon a campaign in the harsh climate of Azarbayjan so he disbanded his troops at a grand review where he ordered them to re-assemble for a campaign against the infidel Georgians and Russians in the following spring.

Aqa Mohammad must have expected a Russian invasion, for the sack of Tiflis was unlikely to pass unnoticed in St. Petersburg. Before Aqa Mohammad's first invasion of Georgia Erekle had warned General Gudovich of the danger which threatened his kingdom; but the Russians had not expected Aqa Mohammad to advance so rapidly, nor had they expected him to attack Tiflis without first taking Erivan and Shusha. But as soon as Catherine heard of the horrors of the sack of Tiflis she ordered immediate retaliation, and during the winter of 1795-96 Russian forces invested Derbend. In the following spring Gudovich, whose dilatory conduct had been partly responsible for the loss of Georgia and the decline of Russia's prestige in the Caucasus, was replaced as viceroy and commander-in-chief by Count Valerian Zubov, a younger brother of the Tsarina's favourite, Count Platon Zubov. Valerian Zubov was only twenty-four, but the operations which he conducted over an extended area of difficult country fully justified Catherine's choice. He had already served under Suvorov in Turkey and Poland, and was adored by his officers and men alike. His first achievement was the capture of Derbend, followed quickly by the surrender of Baku, Kuba and Shamakhi and the khanates of Shirvan, Shekin and Karabagh. By the end of the year Ganja had fallen, Russian forces were within striking distance of Rasht, and Zubov himself was encamped in the Moghan steppe with all Azarbayjan lying helpless before him.²⁰

But Aqa Mohammad's good fortune had not deserted him. In November, 1796, Catherine died and Tsar Paul, detesting his mother's favourites, replaced Zubov by Gudovich and recalled the army north of the Terek. The time had now come for Aqa Mohammad's revenge. During the winter he had been making his preparations, and as an indication of the chastisement which he intended to inflict upon his enemies he brought twenty-seven captive Russian sailors to Tehran in chains, compelled them to gouge out the eyes of forty Iranians who had refused to join the army, and then had them strangled.²¹ But despite all his bravado he was well aware that his irregular cavalry could never face the artillery and disciplined troops of Russia and he told Hajji Ibrahim Khan that he could not risk a pitched battle but would destroy the invaders by guerilla warfare and a scorched earth policy.²²

In the early spring of 1797 he set out once more for Georgia, but some sixty miles south of the Aras he learnt that his old enemy, Ibrahim Khalil

Khan, had fled from Shusha to Dagestan and that the citizens of Shusha were ready to hand over the fortress to him. Leaving his baggage behind him, he hurried forward to the Aras accompanied only by light cavalry, crossed the river with difficulty and entered Shusha in triumph. Three days later, hearing two of his servants quarrelling noisily, he ordered their immediate execution, but as it was Friday (the day of prayer) he postponed the execution until the following morning and with incredible recklessness allowed the servants to continue their duties in his quarters. While he was sleeping they entered his tent and assassinated him. His body was sent to Tehran by Ibrahim Khalil Khan, who had immediately returned to Shusha, and it was placed in the shrine of Shah Abdul Azim, south of the capital, before being transferred to Najaf. The murderers were tortured to death and their bodies burnt. After a brief dynastic struggle Aqa Mohammad's nephew, Baba Khan, won the throne with the help of Hajji Ibrahim Khan and reigned as Fath Ali Shah until 1834.

The character of Aqa Mohammad appears to be the most repulsive of all those conquerors who, down to the beginning of the nineteenth century, moulded the course of Central Asian history, yet his achievement was indubitably positive. His pitiless destruction of the Zand dynasty and his conquest of Khorasan brought a restoration of territory to Iran which, except on the north-western frontier, confirmed the final shape of modern Iran. His pacification of the Turkoman tribes indicated the line of policy which his less competent successors should have followed instead of leaving the final conquest of the Turkomans to Russia, thus losing for Iran the steppe region east of the Caspian.²³ It may be argued that his attack upon Georgia inevitably brought Russia further into the Caucasus, but it is equally possible to maintain that after the Russo-Georgian Treaty of 1783 the Russian advance had become a certainty in any case and was only a matter of time. The Persian invasion of 1795 was a desperate bid to maintain control and it might have worked if Russia had been fully occupied elsewhere. Aqa Mohammad's mistake was to evacuate Georgia so soon and to transfer his army to the other end of Iran. Malcolm was assured that, at the time of his assassination, Aqa Mohammad was already contemplating an attack on Baghdad and thus it seems as if he was consciously emulating the career of Nadir.²⁴ His last years showed prodigious energy, but it must be remembered that compared with most Asian conquerors and most founders of dynasties he was an old man. It had taken him years of patience to acquire the throne and he had little time to restore Iran to her former greatness before passing the kingdom to his successor.

It is reasonable to suppose that the pleasure which Aqa Mohammad seemed to take in inflicting sadistic cruelties on enemies and erring servants sprang from the frustration and bitterness of his childhood castration. His inability to rear sons and to plan for their future deprived him of those feelings of paternal pride and pleasure which all Iranians from Shah to peasant regard as God's peculiar blessing. As a substitute he worked for the peaceful succession of his favourite nephew, Baba Khan, by liquidating all possible rivals. His own father and grandfather had been killed struggling to advance the interests of the Qajars and to gain the throne, and Aqa Mohammad fought incessantly for a further fifteen years before he won it.

In pursuing this objective his restraint was quite as remarkable as his violence. Although he was merciless to his Zand rivals he even forgave his father's murderers in order to maintain the unity of the Qajar tribe, recognizing that the Zands had fallen from power on account of their family rivalry. In working for himself, Aqa Mohammad worked also for the Qajar tribe which was his principal weapon in his bid for power. But beneath these selfish motives the historian may discern certain attitudes of Aqa Mohammad which suggest that in pursuing his own and his tribe's aggrandisement he was not unaware—as Nadir seems to have been—of the general interests and needs of the realm he thirsted to possess. He had found Iran torn by civil war and by widespread violence and lawlessness; the revenue was uncollected; the administration of justice was utterly venal; the roads were unsafe and trade dislocated. During the short period of his reign a semblance of peace and orderly government was restored by the sheer terror of his displeasure. The revenue was assessed and paid; the treasury was filled; caravans crossed the country in relative security and merchants were encouraged to trade in every possible way; the cultivators knew that corrupt or disobedient officials would be ferociously punished; and the tribal khans were kept docile through dread of the Shah's vengeance upon their relatives, kept in Tehran as hostages. Strong government returned to Iran such as the country had not experienced within living memory, and this achievement can be measured by the fact that, apart from the Caucasian provinces, the shape of modern Iran is almost identical with that which Aqa Mohammad bequeathed to his successors, while the growth of administrative centralization which has been a continued feature of nineteenth and twentieth century Iran was first initiated in his lifetime.

The greatest monument to the career of Aqa Mohammad is modern Tehran, of which he was the real architect, building palaces, mosques and caravanserais in the city and enclosing it by a mud wall estimated at seven miles in circumference. But although merchants and craftsmen were encouraged to settle there the population of Tehran at the time of his death was only about 15,000, including the Court. Recognizing that his power rested upon his own tribe in Gorgan, while the south was bitterly anti-Qajar, and sensing the need to be within reach of the critical Georgian and Turkish borders, he chose the position for his capital wisely. Lying midway between Tabriz and Mashhad and between Isfahan and the Caspian, Tehran had no distinguished past, whereas Isfahan was linked in the popular mind with the glory of the Safavis and Shiraz with the fortunes of the Zands. Yet it is an indication of the distaste with which modern Iranians look back to the career of Aqa Mohammad that his memory is nowhere commemorated by the name of a street or a square in the great city which owes its present importance to his ambitions.²⁵

Olivier, relating how Aqa Mohammad ripped open the stomachs of offending servants and blinded an officer who damaged one of his pictures, described the Shah to his masters in Paris as possessing none of the characteristics of a great man, being a brigand without faith or humanity whose rule was based solely on terror.²⁶ Writing to Henry Dundas from Basra in 1801, Malcolm described him somewhat differently :

“Aga Mohammud Khaun was a man of extraordinary ability; though to those who opposed him he was a cruel and relentless tyrant; to others, he was in general a just Prince. His army was inured to fatigue, and regularly paid; he had introduced excellent arrangement into all its Departments, and his known severity occasioned the utmost alacrity and promptness in the execution of orders, and had he lived a few more years, it is difficult to conjecture the progress of his arms.”²⁷

The last and most brutal of Iran's tribal conquerors, Aqa Mohammad Khan Qajar must also rank as one of the makers of modern Iran.

NOTES

¹ The chief printed Persian sources for the period between the death of Nadir Shah and the establishment of the Qajar Dynasty are: (1) Mirza Mohammad Sadeq Musavi Namiye-Isfahani: *Tariḫ-e-Gitigusha dar Tariḫ-e-Khandan-e-Zand*, Tehran, A. H., 1317. (2) Abul Hassan ibn Mohammad Amin Gulstaneh: *Mujmal-e-Tavariḫ dar Tariḫ-e-Zandiyeh*, Tehran, no date. An almost contemporary European account is C. Picault: *Histoire des Revolutions de Perse*, 2 vols., Paris, 1810.

A Persian account of the early Qajar period may be found in Mirza Mohammad Taghi Lesan-ul-Mulk Sepehr: *Nasikh-ul-Tavariḫ*, Tehran, A. H., 1337. A brilliant account of the reign of Aqa Mohammad Khan is given in Sir John Malcolm's *History of Persia*, London, 1815. See also R. G. Watson: *A History of Persia*, London, 1866, and E. Pakravan: *Agha Mohammad Ghajdar*, Tehran, 1953.

An excellent introduction to the Qajar period may be found in A. Lambton: *Persian Society under the Qajars*, in the *Royal Central Asian Journal*, Vol. XLVIII, Part II, April, 1961.

An interesting portrait of Aqa Mohammad Khan appears in James Morier's novel, *Zohrab the Hostage*, London, 1837.

² Sir John Malcolm, who was in a position to obtain accurate information, said that Aqa Mohammad was sixty-three at the time of his assassination in 1797. See J. Malcolm: *The History of Persia*, Vol. II, p. 300.

³ *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 265.

⁴ *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 300.

⁵ W. Francklin: *Observations made on a Tour from Bengal to Persia, in the Years 1786-7*, London, 1790, pp. 335-6.

⁶ An example of one of these ballads is given in Harford Jones Brydges: *The Dynasty of the Kajars*, London, 1833, pp. clxvi-clxviii.

⁷ J. Malcolm: *The History of Persia*, Vol. II, p. 181.

⁸ Harford Jones Brydges: *The Dynasty of the Kajars*, pp. cl-eli.

⁹ Only a small section of the once-massive walls of Kerman are still standing. On the western side of Kerman the site of the besieging Qajar army's camp—the Qal'ah-ye-Aqa Mohammad, as modern Kermanis call it—is still pointed out to visitors, although all traces of the fortifications have entirely disappeared.

¹⁰ Harford Jones Brydges: *The Dynasty of the Kajars*, p. cxli.

¹¹ E. Scott Waring: *A Tour to Sheeraz*, London, 1807, pp. 30-3 and 299-300.

¹² Pottinger's account is confirmed in J. Macdonald Kinneir's *A Geographical Memoir of the Persian Empire*, London, 1813, p. 196.

¹³ J. Malcolm: *The History of Persia*, Vol. II, pp. 197-8, and Ahmad 'Ali Khan-i-Vaziri: *T'ariḫ-i-Kirman*, Tehran, 1961, p. 372.

¹⁴ Mountstuart Elphinstone: *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul*, London, 1839, Vol. II, pp. 311-13.

¹⁵ The history of Iran's relations with her north-eastern neighbours are described in Mir Abdoul Kerim Boukhary's *Histoire de l'Asie Centrale*, Paris, 1876.

¹⁶ The history of Georgia during this period is described in detail in D. M. Lang's *The Last Years of the Georgian Monarchy, 1658-1832*, Columbia, 1957, pp. 205-25.

- ¹⁷ G. Forster: *A Journey from Bengal to England*, London, 1798, Vol. II, pp. 201-2.
- ¹⁸ J. Malcolm: *The History of Persia*, Vol. II, p. 283.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 284.
- ²⁰ John F. Baddeley: *The Russian Conquest of the Caucasus*, London, 1908, pp. 57-9.
- ²¹ G. A. Olivier: *Voyage dans l'Empire Othoman, l'Egypte, et la Perse*, 3 vols., Paris, 1801-07, Vol. II, p. 141.
- ²² J. Malcolm: *The History of Persia*, Vol. II, pp. 297-8.
- ²³ H. L. Rabino: *Mazandaran and Astarabad*, London, 1928, p. 80.
- ²⁴ J. Malcolm: *Memorandum Respecting the Present State of Persia, Political and Commercial*, April 10, 1801, submitted to Henry Dundas, President of the Board of Control, and printed in the *Journal of the Central Asian Society*, Vol. XVI, October, 1929.
- ²⁵ The remains of Aqa Mohammad's Tehran have virtually disappeared, although the base of the structure near the Gulestan Palace known as the Shams ul-Imareh is said to date from this period.
- ²⁶ Letter of J. G. Bruguieres and G. A. Olivier to General Aubert du Bayer, French Ambassador at Istanbul, 9 nivose, An 5 (1796), quoted in D. M. Lang: *The Last Years of the Georgian Monarchy, 1658-1832*, p. 222.
- ²⁷ J. Malcolm: *Memorandum*, April 10, 1801, in *J.C.A.S.*, Vol. XVI, October, 1929. Malcolm described the Shah as "one of the most able monarchs that ever sat upon the throne of Persia" in *The History of Persia*, Vol. II, p. 300.

(The proper names in the above article have, with a few conventional exceptions, been transliterated in accordance with the P.C.G.N. system; but in order to facilitate reading diacritical marks have been omitted.)

