

The C.I.A. in Iran

... Continued from previous file ...

THE COUP

First Few Days Look Disastrous

The coup began on the night of Aug. 15 and was immediately compromised by a talkative Iranian Army officer whose remarks were relayed to Mr. Mossadegh.

The operation, the secret history says, "still might have succeeded in spite of this advance warning had not most of the participants proved to be inept or lacking in decision at the critical juncture."

Dr. Mossadegh's chief of staff, Gen. Taghi Riahi, learned of the plot hours before it was to begin and sent his deputy to the barracks of the Imperial Guard.

The deputy was arrested there, according to the history, just as pro-shah soldiers were fanning out across the city arresting other senior officials. Telephone lines between army and government offices were cut, and the telephone exchange was occupied.

But phones inexplicably continued to function, which gave Dr. Mossadegh's forces a key advantage. General Riahi also eluded the pro-shah units, rallying commanders to the prime minister's side.

Pro-shah soldiers sent to arrest Dr. Mossadegh at his home were instead captured. The top military officer working with General Zahedi fled when he saw tanks and loyal government soldiers at army headquarters.

The next morning, the history states, the Tehran radio announced that a coup against the government had failed, and Dr. Mossadegh scrambled to strengthen his hold on the army and key installations. C.I.A. officers inside the embassy were flying blind; the history says they had "no way of knowing what was happening."

Mr. Roosevelt left the embassy and tracked down General Zahedi, who was in hiding north of Tehran. Surprisingly, the general was not ready to abandon the operation. The coup, the two men agreed, could still work, provided they could persuade the public that General Zahedi was the lawful prime minister.

To accomplish this, the history discloses, the coup plotters had to get out the news that the shah had signed the two decrees.

The C.I.A. station in Tehran sent a message to The Associated Press in New York, asserting that "unofficial reports are current to the effect that leaders of the plot are armed with two decrees of the shah, one dismissing Mossadegh and the other appointing General Zahedi to replace him."

The C.I.A. and its agents also arranged for the decrees to be mentioned in some Tehran papers, the history says.

The propaganda initiative quickly bogged down. Many of the C.I.A.'s Iranian agents were under arrest or on the run. That afternoon, agency operatives prepared a statement from General Zahedi that they hoped to distribute publicly. But they could not find a printing press that was not being watched by forces loyal to the prime minister.

On Aug. 16, prospects of reviving the operation were dealt a seemingly a fatal blow when it was learned that the shah had bolted to Baghdad. C.I.A. headquarters cabled Tehran urging Mr. Roosevelt, the station chief, to leave immediately.

He did not agree, insisting that there was still "a slight remaining chance of success," if the shah would broadcast an address on the Baghdad radio and General Zahedi took an aggressive stand.

The first sign that the tide might turn came with reports that Iranian soldiers had broken up Tudeh, or Communist, groups, beating them and making them chant their support for the shah. "The station continued to feel that the project was not quite dead," the secret history recounts.

Meanwhile, Dr. Mossadegh had overreached, playing into the C.I.A.'s hands by dissolving Parliament after the coup.

On the morning of Aug. 17 the shah finally announced from Baghdad that he had signed the decrees — though he had by now delayed so long that plotters feared it was too late.

At this critical point Dr. Mossadegh let down his guard. Lulled by the shah's departure and the arrests of some officers involved in the coup, the government recalled most troops it had stationed around the city, believing that the danger had passed.

That night the C.I.A. arranged for General Zahedi and other key Iranian agents and army officers to be smuggled into the embassy compound "in the bottom of cars and in closed jeeps" for a "council of war."

They agreed to start a counterattack on Aug. 19, sending a leading cleric from Tehran to the holy city of Qum to try to orchestrate a call for a holy war against Communism. (The religious forces they were trying to manipulate would years later call the United States "the Great Satan.")

Using travel papers forged by the C.I.A., key army officers went to outlying army garrisons to persuade commanders to join the coup.

Once again, the shah disappointed the C.I.A. He left Baghdad for Rome the next day,



The Associated Press

Protestors tore down a statue of Riza Shah, the father of Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi.

apparently an exile. Newspapers supporting Dr. Mossadegh reported that the Pahlevi dynasty had come to an end, and a statement from the Communist Party's central committee attributed the coup attempt to "Anglo-American intrigue." Demonstrators ripped down imperial statues -- as they would again 26 years later during the Islamic revolution.

The C.I.A. station cabled headquarters for advice on whether to "continue with TP-Ajax or withdraw."

"Headquarters spent a day featured by depression and despair," the history states, adding, "The message sent to Tehran on the night of Aug. 18 said that 'the operation has been tried and failed,' and that 'in the absence of strong recommendations to the contrary operations against Mossadegh should be discontinued.'"



Corbis Bettmann

As the C.I.A.-backed royalist coup seemed to be failing in Iran, the shah and Empress Soraya arrived in Rome on Aug. 18,

THE SUCCESS

C.I.A. and Moscow Are Both Surprised

But just as the Americans were ready to quit, the mood on the streets of Tehran shifted.

On the morning of Aug. 19, several Tehran papers published the shah's long-awaited decrees, and soon pro-shah crowds were building in the streets.

"They needed only leadership," the secret history says. And Iranian agents of the C.I.A. provided it. Without specific orders, a journalist who was one of the agency's most important Iranian agents led a crowd toward Parliament, inciting people to set fire to the offices of a newspaper owned by Dr. Mossadegh's foreign minister. Another Iranian C.I.A. agent led a crowd to sack the offices of pro-Tudeh papers.

"The news that something quite startling was happening spread at great speed throughout the city," the history states.

The C.I.A. tried to exploit the situation, sending urgent messages that the **Rashidian** brothers and two key American agents should "swing the security forces to the side of the demonstrators."

But things were now moving far too quickly for the agency to manage. An Iranian Army colonel who had been involved in the plot several days earlier suddenly appeared outside Parliament with a tank, while members of the now-disbanded Imperial Guard seized trucks and drove through the streets. "By 10:15 there were pro-shah truckloads of military personnel at all the main squares," the secret history says.

By noon the crowds began to receive direct leadership from a few officers involved in the plot and some who had switched sides. Within an hour the central telegraph office fell, and telegrams were sent to the provinces urging a pro-shah uprising. After a brief shootout, police headquarters and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs fell as well.

The Tehran radio remained the biggest prize. With the government's fate uncertain, it was broadcasting a program on cotton prices. But by early afternoon a mass of civilians, army officers and policemen overwhelmed it. Pro-shah speakers went on the air, broadcasting the coup's success and reading the royal decrees.

At the embassy, C.I.A. officers were elated, and Mr. Roosevelt got General Zahedi out of hiding. An army officer found a tank and drove him to the radio station, where he spoke to the nation.

Dr. Mossadegh and other government officials were rounded up, while officers supporting General Zahedi placed "known supporters of TP-Ajax" in command of all units of the Tehran garrison.

The Soviet Union was caught completely off-guard. Even as the Mossadegh government was falling, the Moscow radio was broadcasting a story on "the failure of the American adventure in Iran."

But C.I.A. headquarters was as surprised as Moscow. When news of the coup's success arrived, it "seemed to be a bad joke, in view of the depression that still hung on from the day before," the history says.

Throughout the day, Washington got most of its information from news agencies, receiving only two cablegrams from the station. Mr. Roosevelt later explained that if he had told headquarters what was going on, "London and Washington would have thought they were crazy and told them to stop immediately," the history states.

Still, the C.I.A. took full credit inside the government. The following year it overthrew the government of Guatemala, and a myth developed that the agency could topple governments anywhere in the world.

Iran proved that third world king-making could be heady.

"It was a day that should never have ended," the C.I.A.'s secret history said, describing Aug. 19, 1953. "For it carried with it such a sense of excitement, of satisfaction and of jubilation that it is doubtful whether any other can come up to it."



A. Rashki / The Associated Press

Royalists, carrying a picture of the shah, rode a commandeered bus in Tehran on Aug. 19, 1953, when the coup became a success.

Eccentric Nationalist Begets Strange History

By ELAINE SCIOLINO

WASHINGTON, April 15 — Except for Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, father of its revolution, no leader has left a deeper mark on Iran's 20th century landscape than Mohammed Mossadegh. And no 20th century event has fueled Iran's suspicion of the United States as his overthrow has.

An eccentric European-educated lawyer whose father was a bureaucrat and whose mother descended from Persian kings, Dr. Mossadegh served as a minister and governor before he opposed Reza Shah's accession in the 1920's.

He was imprisoned and then put under house arrest at his estate in the walled village of Ahmadabad west of Tehran. Eventually he bought the village, growing crops, founding an elementary school and beginning a public health project.

When Britain and Russia forced Reza Shah from power in favor of his son, Mohammed Reza Pahlevi, in 1941, Dr. Mossadegh became a Member of Parliament. He was hailed as a hero for his fiery speeches on the evils of British control of Iran's oil industry. In 1951, when Parliament voted to nationalize the industry, the young shah, recognizing the nationalists' popularity, appointed Dr. Mossadegh prime minister.

In that job he became a prisoner of his own nationalism, unable to reach an oil compromise. Even as the British negotiated with Iran, they won the support of the major oil companies in imposing an effective global boycott on Iranian oil.

Still, in the developing world Dr. Mossadegh became an icon of anti-imperialism. He was revered despite his odd mannerisms, which included conducting business in bed in gray woolen pajamas, weeping publicly and complaining perpetually of poor health.

He amassed power. When the shah refused his demand for control of the armed forces in 1952, Dr. Mossadegh resigned, only to be reinstated in the face of popular riots.

He then displayed a streak of authoritarianism, bypassing Parliament by conducting a national referendum to win approval for its dissolution. Meanwhile, the United States became alarmed at the strength of Iran's Communist Party, which supported Dr. Mossadegh.

In August 1953, a dismissal attempt by the shah sent Dr. Mossadegh's followers into the streets. The shah fled, amid fears in the new Eisenhower administration that Iran might move too close to Moscow.

Yet Dr. Mossadegh did not promote the interests of the Communists, though he drew on their support. Paradoxically, the party turned from him in the end because it viewed him as insufficiently committed and too close to the United States. By the time the royalist coup overthrew him after a few chaotic days, he had alienated many landowners, clerics and merchants.

After a trial, he served three years in prison and ended up under house arrest at his estate. In March 1967, in his mid-80's and weakened by radium treatments for throat cancer, he died.

When the revolution brought the clerics to power in 1979, anti-shah nationalists tried to revive Dr. Mossadegh's memory. A Tehran thoroughfare called Pahlevi Avenue was renamed Mossadegh Avenue.

But Ayatollah Khomeini saw him as a promoter not of Islam but of Persian nationalism, and envied his popularity. So Mossadegh Avenue became Vali Asr, after the revered Hidden Imam, whose reappearance someday, Shiite Muslims believe, will establish the perfect Islamic political community. Still, even Ayatollah Khomeini was careful not to go too far. Ignoring Dr. Mossadegh, rather than excoriating him, became the rule.

Two decades later, the Mossadegh cult has been revitalized by resurgent nationalism and frustration with the strictures of Islam. Dr. Mossadegh inspires the young, who long for heroes and have not necessarily found them, either in clerics or kings.

In campaigns for local elections in February 1999 and parliamentary elections a year later, reformist advertising made use of Dr. Mossadegh's sad, elongated face. And every year since his death, his supporters have rallied at his estate.

His legacy still stirs considerable debate. In August, Parliament approved a bill to abolish a holiday marking the nationalization of the oil industry in 1951. The decision set off protests in the press.

"Alas! Parliament ignored the most apparent symbol of the struggle of the Iranian people throughout history against colonialism," the reformist daily Khordad said.

In November, legislators were forced to reinstate the holiday.



The Associated Press

Mohammed Mossadegh, the ousted prime minister, entering court for his trial.

C.I.A. Tried, With Little Success, to Use U.S. Press in Coup

By JAMES RISEN

WASHINGTON, April 15 — Central Intelligence Agency officials plotting the 1953 coup in Iran hoped to plant articles in American newspapers saying Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlevi's return resulted from a homegrown revolt against a Communist-leaning government, internal agency documents show.

Those hopes were largely disappointed. The C.I.A.'s history of the coup shows that its operatives had only limited success in manipulating American reporters and that none of the Americans covering the coup worked for the agency.

An analysis of the press coverage shows that American journalists filed straightforward, factual dispatches that prominently mentioned the role of Iran's Communists in street violence leading up to the coup. Western correspondents in Iran and Washington never reported that some of the unrest had been stage-managed by C.I.A. agents posing as Communists. And they gave little emphasis to accurate contemporaneous reports in Iranian newspapers and on the Moscow radio asserting that Western powers were secretly arranging the shah's return to power.

It was just eight years after the end of World War II, which left American journalists with a sense of national interest framed by six years of confrontation between the Allies and the Axis. The front pages of Western newspapers were dominated by articles about the new global confrontation with the Soviet Union, about Moscow's prowess in developing nuclear weapons and about Congressional allegations of "Red" influence in Washington.

In one instance, the history indicates, the C.I.A. was apparently able to use contacts at The Associated Press to put on the news wire a statement from Tehran about royal decrees that the C.I.A. itself had written. But mostly, the agency relied on less direct means to exploit the media.

The Iran desk of the State Department, the document says, was able to place a C.I.A. study in Newsweek, "using the normal channel of desk officer to journalist." The article was one of several planted press reports that, when reprinted in Tehran, fed the "war of nerves" against Iran's prime minister, Mohammed Mossadegh.

The history says the Iran operation exposed the agency's shortcomings in manipulating the American press. The C.I.A. "lacked contacts capable of placing material so that the American publisher was unwitting as to its source."

The history discloses that a C.I.A. officer, working under cover as the embassy's press officer, drove two American reporters to a house outside Tehran where they were shown the shah's decrees dismissing the prime minister.

Kennett Love, the New York Times reporter in Tehran during the coup, wrote about the royal decrees in the newspaper the next day, without mentioning how he had seen them. In an interview, he said he had agreed to the embassy official's ground rules that he not report the American role in arranging the trip.

Mr. Love said he did not know at the time that the official worked for the C.I.A.

After the coup succeeded, Mr. Love did in one article briefly refer to Iranian press reports of American involvement, and The New York Times also published an article from Moscow reporting Soviet charges that the United States was behind the coup. But neither The Times nor other American news organizations appear to have examined such charges seriously.

In a 1960 paper he wrote while studying at Princeton University, Mr. Love explained that he "was responsible, in an impromptu sort of way, for speeding the final victory of the royalists."

Seeing a half-dozen tanks parked in front of Tehran's radio station, he said, "I told the tank commanders that a lot of people were getting killed trying to storm Dr. Mossadegh's house and that they would be of some use instead of sitting idle at the radio station." He added, "They took their machines in a body to Kokh Avenue and put the three tanks at Dr. Mossadegh's house out of action."

Mr. Love, who left The New York Times in 1962, said in an interview that he had urged the tanks into action "because I wanted to stop the bloodshed."

Months afterward, Mr. Love says, he was told by Robert C. Doty, then Cairo bureau chief and his boss, of evidence of American involvement in the coup.

But Mr. Doty, who died in 1974, did not write about the matter, and by the summer of 1954, Mr. Love decided to tell the New York office what he knew. In a July 26, 1954, letter to Emanuel R. Freedman, then the foreign editor, Mr. Love wrote, "The only instance since I joined The Times in which I have allowed policy to influence a strict news approach was in failing to report the role our own agents played in the overthrow of Mossadegh."

Mr. Love said he had hoped that the foreign editor would order him to pursue the subject. But he never received any response, he said.

"I wanted to let Freedman know that I knew there had been U.S. involvement in the coup, but that I hadn't written about it," he said. "I expected him to say, 'Jump on that story.' But there was no response." Mr. Freedman died in 1971.

DONALD WILBER

'Gentleman Spy' at Helm

Donald Wilber, who planned the coup in Iran and wrote its secret history, was old-school C.I.A., a Princetonian and a Middle East architecture expert who fit neatly into the mold of the "gentleman spy."

Years of wandering through Middle Eastern architectural sites gave him the perfect cover for a clandestine life. By 1953, he was an obvious choice as the operation's strategist.

The coup was the high point of his life as a spy. Although he would excel in academia, at the agency being part-time was a handicap.

"I never requested promotion, and was given only one, after the conclusion of Ajax," Dr. Wilber wrote of the Iran operation.

On his last day, "I was ushered down to the lobby by a young secretary, turned over my badge to her and left." He added, "This treatment rankled for some time. I did deserve the paperweight."

He died in 1997 at 89.

Courtesy of New York times:

<http://www.nytimes.com/library/world/mideast/041600iran-cia-intro.html>