Born of conflicting interests and influences — those ancient tensions deeply rooted in its own society — the Iranian revolution generated numerous and alternating cycles of triumph and tragedy, the one always inextricably resulting from and offsetting the other. This series of vast political shifts saw the nation shudder from a near feudal monarchy to a democratized state, before finally relapsing into an oppressive, religiously based conservatism.

The Prelude: The White Revolution

Dating from 1960 to 1963, the White Revolution was a period of time in Iran in which modernization, westernization, and industrialization were ambitiously promoted by the the country’s governing royalty: the Pahlavi regime. Yet although many of these changes brought material and social benefit, the country was not ready to embrace such a rapid transition from its traditional structure; thus the White Revolution sowed the seeds that would later blossom into the Iranian Revolution

Under the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi, the State of Iran underwent serious industrial expansion. After seizing almost complete political power for himself, the Shah set in motion the land reform law of 1962. This law forced landed minorities to surrender vast tracts of lands to the government so that it could be redistributed to small scale agriculturalists. The landowners who experienced losses were compensated through shares of state owned Iranian industries. Cultivators and laborers also received share holdings of Iranian industries and agricultural profits. This reform not only helped the agrarian community, but encouraged and supported

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3 Ibid.
industrial growth as well. By the time of their full implementation in 1963, such agrarian reforms led to the redistribution of land to 2.5 million families.\textsuperscript{4} Yet aside from their massive economic changes, the reforms produced a social impact which was to prove perhaps even more historically significant: the disruption of traditional Iranian orders related to influence and prestige. For the process of effecting governmental land programs both elevated and diminished certain populations. Those whose interests aligned with the government’s goals, and who assisted in obtaining them, began to replace the high status landowners in agrarian and rural areas as the preeminent sources for irrigation, farming, ranching, and development.\textsuperscript{5}

In similar fashion, the Shah’s White Revolution pursued additional social programs that achieved modernization benefits. He began construction of an expanded road, rail, and air network, a number of dam and irrigation projects, and programs to eradicate diseases such as malaria.\textsuperscript{6} He encouraged and sponsored organized “corps” in the rural territories of Iran that aided disadvantaged citizens in matters such as literacy and health, as well as, ratifying many liberation reforms for women.\textsuperscript{7} Each of these initiatives generated obvious triumphs for the Shahs’ movement, all evident through the industrial, agrarian, and health advancements made throughout the period.

Yet the Shah’s mission of modernization simultaneously laid the foundation for tragedy as well. Many citizens of Iran did not agree with governmental action that so vastly changed traditional Iranian society. Those who did not receive direct benefits, such as land or rights, felt

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{5} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{6} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{7} Ibid.
cheated. This impression was even more socially toxic due to the White Revolution’s obvious ties to “western” ideals and influences. According to the *Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, the White Revolution “failed to achieve [acceptance] in… the more traditional sectors of society” because the involvement “of Western corporations and banks [for its financing] fueled concerns about Western economic imperialism.” This was a tragedy that would not lay dormant for long.

Likewise, many citizens who lived in conservative religious areas of Iran felt their culture silenced and suppressed by White Revolution policies. These factions of the population thus developed contempt for their country’s modernization. Many of Iran’s Shīʿite muslim leaders publicly opposed and excoriated the White Revolution for its liberation reforms for women, stating that they were anti-Islamic. Of course, lurking beneath these supposed moral objections was a political frustration — the diminishment of clerical power. For the White Revolution’s disruption of established rural prestige structures, through its land reform and literacy efforts, had begun to erode the social power of many Islamic ‘ulamā’ — local church scholars who specialized sacred law and theology. The land reforms had even broken up the church’s ability to profit economically from many tracts of real estate that it had previously held in religious “trusts” (areas known as vaqf).
Lastly, the White Revolution fueled a tragic level of national division by its close political alignment with the United States of America — a government seen by most Iranians as a foreign intruder. Multiple U.S. administrations, including those of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, both pressured and supported the Iranian Shah as he engaged in his seemingly “westernized” reforms — those of political, social and economic reorganization.\(^{14}\) Indeed, the United States essentially tried to act as the White Revolution’s primary partner.\(^ {15}\) Yet this association ironically deprived the movement of domestic legitimacy. For example, U.S. support for the White Revolution’s use of a secret police force, known as SAVAK, to eliminate opposition through illegal kidnapping, torture and executions, caused outrage in the Iranian populace.\(^ {16}\) Even the Revolution’s relatively progressive and successful initiatives, such as land reform and the establishment of service corps, became tainted by U.S. associations, since financing and profit by western corporations was discovered.\(^ {17}\) For many Iranians, such American investment quickly fueled concern about imperialistic intentions.\(^ {18}\) According to the *Oxford Dictionary of Islam* these hostilities toward the White Revolution would tragically fuel the “popular dissatisfaction [that led] to the Islamic revolution of 1979”.\(^ {19}\)

**The Reaction: The Iranian Revolution**

Though some of its apparent triumphs — industrial and technological progression — had been substantial, the White Revolution’s cultural and religions disturbances had poised Iran for a complete reversal. In the 1970s, negative reaction to the government spread increasingly through

\[^{15}\] Ibid.
\[^{18}\] Ibid.
\[^{19}\] Ibid.
the country; and in response the Shah Pahlavi intensified his methods of sociopolitical repression.\textsuperscript{20} Outlets for political expression became rare.\textsuperscript{21} Any Iranians caught or accused of openly acting or speaking out against the Shah were met with censorship, surveillance, harassment, torture, and/or detention.\textsuperscript{22}

Within this cycle of escalating unrest, a predominant voice of conservative and religious outrage emerged: that of Ayatollah Khomeini, a former professor of philosophy in Qom. Khomeini’s message, which always combined religion with a populist appeal, gained great sway with the people of Iran, and threatened the Shah’s legitimacy. The government eventually forced Khomeini into exile in 1964.\textsuperscript{23} However, his opinions continued to resonate with Iranian still.

Yet Khomeini’s expulsion did little to improve Iran’s unrest — much of which was exacerbated by governmental aggression and mishandling. Protests grew; and in clumsy response, “[m]any people were [tragically] killed by government forces in anti-regime protests, serving only to fuel the violence in a Shi‘īte country where martyrdom played a fundamental role in religious expression”.\textsuperscript{24} An endless cycle of violence took on its own momentum, with religious fervor augmenting each time fatalities occurred. Over time, even Iran’s secular political left joined in the country’s swelling government opposition, which adopted traditional Shi‘īte muslim trappings for itself. The revolutionary rallying cry of “Allāhu akbar!” (“God is great!”) become more frequent at protests and from the top of roofs.\textsuperscript{25}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{20} Willcocks, Michael J. \textit{Agent or Client: Who Instigated the White Revolution of the Shah and the People in Iran, 1963?} University of Manchester, 2015, www.research.manchester.ac.uk/portal/files/54578593/FULL_TEXT.PDF.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
In January of 1979, Shah Pahlavi and his family at last fled Iran to get away from an open, boiling political revolution that continued to ensue even after his departure. In February of 1979, Khomeini returned from exile to step up as the revolution's new leader, and he quickly proclaimed Iran to be an Islamic State—“a theocratic republic guided by Islamic principles.”

Khomeini additionally preached for a rejection and expulsion of all those “western” influences which had become inextricably associated with the deposed Shah — in particular the United States. This indirect encouragement of aggression toward America would ultimately lead to tragic crisis: the seizing of the U.S. embassy in Tehran.

Throughout the people of Iran’s war against the corrupted government, the triumphs and the tragedies made during the White Revolution were reversed. All of the progression toward westernization, industrialization, and modernization was ultimately inverted. The land that had been given to small scale agriculturalists was returned to the clerical power once the religion took over in Iran. Many of the reforms that had aided in positively effecting women’s rights were stripped away; they were seen as anti-Islamic. Importantly, the Iranian Revolution focused on the empowerment of the clergy and deeply religious sects and communities, to the exclusion of many others. Similarly to the White Revolution, the underprivileged and

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28 Ibid.
impoverished communities, once again, were overlooked and left in destitution; indeed, the socio-economic state was made worse for some, once land reforms were rescinded.\textsuperscript{33}

The Iranian Revolution essentially granted new “triumph” to those sects who believed themselves the “tragic” victims of the White Revolution. At the cost of abandoning certain social developments, the country’s major religion, Islam, prevailed against a government that had oppressed it. Many governmental offices influenced by the west were dismantled: SAVAK, officials close to the Shah, and allies of the United Sates.\textsuperscript{34} The result of the religion, and Ayatollah Khomeini, taking power was “the replacement of his [the Shah’s]… government”.\textsuperscript{35}

**The Final Stage: Events that Lead to Isolation**

Following inevitably from the events of the Iranian Revolution, a final tragedy was to crown Iran’s political evolution — a new-found international hostility and self-imposed isolation, especially in U.S.-Iranian relations.

Subsequent to Iran declaring itself an Islamic Republic and overthrowing the western powers that had loomed over it, the country became a steadfast antagonist to the United States.\textsuperscript{36} For example, Iran consistently expressed strong discontent and opposition to any U.S. attempts to sponsor or create policies in the Middle East.\textsuperscript{37} Similarly, Iran actively sought to impede any accommodation of the United States’ primary ally in the region: the State of Israel, a country that, from Iran’s perspective, is a “painful legacy of Western imperialism.”\textsuperscript{38} 

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., p. xxxv
Yet the sum of Iran’s antagonism to U.S. interests was even more universal. According to Krysta Wise in her article, *Islamic Revolution of 1979: The Downfall of American-Iranian Relations*, the “declining relationship [of Iran and America] was… proven through six major events in 1979: the removal of U.S. “containment,” the alteration of oil policies, a change in U.S.-Iranian arms sale agreement, U.S. disapproval for Iran’s “lack” of human rights, the Iranian hostage crisis, and the U.S. embargo on Iran.”

The removal of “U.S. containment,” as referenced by Wise, involved Iran’s ejection of American intelligence collection resources from the country. Such expulsion was a huge blow to the United States’ efforts to spy on Soviet missile and nuclear testing sites in Soviet Central Asia. Additionally, because the Iranian government eventually shifted its foreign political policies toward the Soviet Union, that country came into possession of important knowledge on U.S. military advancements, such as missiles and fighter planes. With the cold war currently raging, and the Soviets posing such a large threat to America, these events were a critical hit to the U.S.

Yet, the United States government was not only crippled by Iran’s new friendliness with the Soviet Union, but also by revisions it made to the global oil industry. According to the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), Iran holds 12.8% of the world’s oil reserves, and following the revolution Iran repressed 1/5 of OPEC’s production capability. The Iranian oil cutoff strained the global oil market. “The U.S. bought approximately 200 million

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40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
fewer barrels of oil during 1979. By December, world oil prices were approximately fifty percent higher than when Iran first cut back the oil supply.” Where Iran triumphed from the cutoff, reaping the benefits of the oil profits, the U.S. was required to pay higher prices for foreign oil.

Along with cutting off the oil supplied by Iran, Khomeini cancelled American arms sales with Iran. These arms transactions had made the U.S. billions of dollars and helped boost the American economy. In 1979, after the sales were officially cancelled, the U.S. lost seven billion dollars worth of weapons profit, and were forced to find other buyers in order to keep the U.S. economy strong.

In addition to their other disagreements, Iran and America also became combatants with respect to ideas like human rights. The U.S. loudly expressed its discontent with many actions of the Iranian government which it deemed “inhumane,” for example, the death sentence which Iran pronounced on former Shah, Mohammad Reza, and the executions of other individuals who opposed the new clerical regime. In answer, Iran decried the United States’ support of the oppressive and illegal acts of Reza’s reign. Eventually, the U.S. retracted its support for the Revolution, and the U.S. Senate passed a resolution condemning Iran for many of the same actions which had been advocated as acceptable for the Shah.

Propelling the irreparable disintegration of the countries’ relationship were those events known as the Iran Hostage Crisis. On November 4th, 1979, Islamic students stormed the U.S.

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44 Ibid.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
Embassy in Tehran, taking hostage 52 American employees and demanding that the Shah return from receiving “medical treatment” in the United States to face trial in Iran.\textsuperscript{49} Matters were made worse after Iran declined President Carter’s peaceful attempts to negotiate release. In a letter from Carter to Khomeini, Carter asked “In the name of the American people, I ask that you release unharmed all Americans presently detained in Iran and those held with them and allow them to leave your country safely and without delay.”\textsuperscript{50} However, no such quick resolution occurred. The hostage situation only ended when the hostages were released 444 days later after the U.S. agreed to release the Shah, and unfreeze the Iranian assets in U.S. banks which they had frozen during the hostage crisis.\textsuperscript{51}

The last straw which lead to total severance between Iran and the United States was the U.S. embargo on Iran.\textsuperscript{52} During the hostage crisis President Carter passed Executive Order No. 12170. This order stated:

“I, JIMMY CARTER, President of the United States, find that the situation in Iran constitutes an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy and economy of the United States and hereby declare a national emergency to deal with that threat. I hereby order blocked all property and interests in property of the Government of Iran, its instrumentalities and controlled entities and the Central Bank of Iran which are or become subject to the jurisdiction of the United States or which are in or come within the possession or control of persons subject to the jurisdiction of the United States”.\textsuperscript{53} This order has been continually adopted by every United States president following Carter.\textsuperscript{54}

\textsuperscript{50} Carter, Jimmy. “Letter from Jimmy Carter to Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini Regarding the Release of the Iranian Hostages.” Received by Ayatollah Khomeini, 6 Nov. 1979, Washington D.C.
\textsuperscript{53} Executive Order. No. 12170, 1979, p. 457.
Ultimately, events of its multiple revolutions caused both triumphs and tragedies for Iran. The aspects and impacts of these developments were never continuous, but rather interchangeable with each other; one faction’s triumph was the cause for another’s tragedy, and vice versa, showing the peculiarity of the Iranian Revolution. Each event caused the next, and caused each cycle of triumph and tragedy, the one always inextricably resulting from and offsetting the other.
Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources


Theses historical images were a primary sourced used to give me a better grasp about the events, and situations of the Iranian Revolution. They helped me understand the true terrors of the tragic events that occurred during that period. They also helped me understand how the citizens of Iran reacted to such events.

Executive Order. No. 12170, 1979, p. 457.

This historical document is a primary source; it is an executive order given by President Carter. This source was used in my paper as a quote. It helped me understand the extreme lengths to which the United States was willing to go, in order to diminish the power of Iran, and to get the U.S. hostages back from Iran.


This primary source is a letter from President Carter to Ayatollah Khomeini. It was used in my paper as a quote. It helped me understand the great extent of Iran’s hostility towards the U.S. by showing that President Carter tried for diplomacy, but Iran completely crushed any, and all, hope of settling the Hostage Crisis without violence.


This historical photograph is a primary source that was used to help me grasp the full extent to which the people of the Iran feared and hated their Shah. It was a propaganda piece to encourage disloyalty to the Shah. It helped me understand that the hate for the Shah of Iran was a common national sentiment.


This historical newspaper is a primary source that helped me gain insight to how the American people viewed what was happening in the Iran, specifically, what was taking place with the U.S. Embassy in Iran.

This primary source is a historical photograph that was used to help me gain insight on the relationship between the United States and Iran. This is a picture of President Kennedy welcoming the Shah and his wife to the White House. This helped me understand that America not only viewed the Shah as a political foothold, but by having this moment photographed, Kennedy was trying to encourage a positive perspective of the Shah.


This primary source is a historical photograph that was used to help me gain insight on the relationship between the United States and Iran. This photograph shows President Johnson at an Iranian oil sight with the Shah of Iran. This helped me to understand that the Shah really was a strong political ally to the U.S.

Secondary Sources


This secondary source is a scholarly paper about the White Revolution. It was used as a reference, and was quoted in my paper. It helped me to understand the causes of the White Revolution, as well as, many effects that took place because of it.


This secondary source is an encyclopedia page about the Iranian Revolution. This source was used as a reference throughout my paper. It helped me understand many intimate details of the revolution. It also gave me and insight into many of the causes and effects of the Iranian Revolution, as well as, many key figures and events throughout.


This secondary source is an encyclopedia page about the White Revolution of Iran. This source was used as a reference throughout my paper. This source helped me understand the very specific details to many of the reforms and corps that were established during the revolution, as well as, many effects and causes.

This secondary source is an encyclopedia page about the Shah of Iran: Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. This source was used as a reference throughout my paper. It helped me understand the motivations and intentions of the Shah of Iran during the White Revolution.


This secondary source is an article written by the United Stated Government discussing the part the United Stated played in the White Revolution. It also helped me to understand the motivations and intentions of the United States government. This source was used a reference for my paper.


This secondary source is a scholarly paper about the conflict between the United States and Iran. I used this paper for information following the Iranian Revolution. This source helped me to understand the consequences following the fallout between the United States and Iran post revolution.


This secondary source is an article on the history of Iran. I used this source to give my the basic facts about the Iranian Revolution. This source helped me understand the essential and fundamental history, and beginning, to Iran’s Revolution.


This secondary source is data records of the world’s oil producers. This source helped me understand just how much of the world’s oil Iran controls. It helped me understand the detrimental effect on the U.S. when Iran cutoff their oil supply.

This secondary source is an article about the Iranian Revolution. This source was used as a reference throughout my paper. It helped me understand many intimate details of the revolution. It also gave me and insight into many of the causes and effects of the Iranian Revolution, as well as, many key figures and events throughout.


This secondary source is an excerpt from the book of Oxford Islamic Studies put online. It helped me to understand the flaws of the White Revolution. It also helped me understand how the Iranian people views the western influences that were visible throughout the revolution.


This secondary source is an encyclopedia page about the White Revolution of Iran. This source was used as a reference throughout my paper. This source helped me understand specific details to views and perspectives of the people of Iran during the revolution, as well as, many effects and causes.


This secondary source is a scholarly paper about the conflict between the United States and Iran. I used this paper for information following the Iranian Revolution. This source helped me to understand the consequences following the fallout between the United States and Iran post revolution.