

Cosroe Chaqueri (ed.): The Left in Iran. 1905-1940, London, Merlin Press, 2010. (Revolutionary History. 10/2). 458 pp. – ISBN 9780850366723;
Chaqueri, Cosroe (ed.): The Left in Iran. 1941-1957, London, Merlin Press, 2011. (Revolutionary History. 10/3). 520 pp. – ISBN 9780850366563.

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In today's world, when hearing of the Middle East most people would primarily think of terms like war, oil, Islam, Islamism, terrorism and, in recent years, the "Arab spring". Apart of the superficiality of this kind of generalisation which gives testament to either widespread ignorance or rather geopolitically motivated bending of information, very few people would know about a Middle Eastern "Left" or its history. More informed people might still know about "Arab socialism", i.e. those authoritarian political systems which were established in the 1950s and 1960s in countries such as Egypt, Iraq and Syria, and which followed an anti-colonial developmentalist course. Another instance which could come to mind is the role of the Iranian Left in the revolution of 1979 which was finally brutally crushed by the ascending Islamic Republic of Iran. But apart of these cases little is known about this region's Left, particularly before the Second World War. Nevertheless the Left's history in the Middle East is a rich and fascinating one and its study could also help to de-orientalise the discourse about this region as well as unearth forgotten experiences which might inform current progressive movements in a region marked by turmoil.

In regard to Iran, the two volumes of "The Left in Iran", both edited by Cosroe Chaqueri as special issues of the journal *Revolutionary History*, are an important contribution to this task and will be of high value for historians of Marxism as well as for historians of modern Iran in the future. Each volume includes a rather brief introduction into and discussion of the history of the Iranian Left in the respective time period. Additionally one finds articles which deal with certain aspects of the history of the Iranian Left such as specific groups or biographies of particular political activists or theoreticians. Included in these more general discussions one can find valuable comments on the historiography of the Iranian Left, particularly an article by Chaqueri in the second volume specifically dealing with this issue (vol. II, p. 231-347). The core of the volumes, though, is a wide collection of documents on the Iranian Left. These documents give a rich insight into a history not well known and hitherto full of misrepresentations, as will be briefly discussed below.

The first volume, which covers the time period between 1905 and 1940 and therefore goes back to the very beginnings of socialist politics in Iran, starts off with an introduction into the social and economic background to the left's ascension at the beginning of the 20th century, i.e. the crisis of pre-capitalist Iranian society, the multilayered imperial penetration of the country by Russia and Britain, and finally the transnational labour migration from Iran to the Russian Caucasus. This is important since the first socialist oriented movements in Iran must be analysed in the context of Iranian and Russian reciprocity and were highly influenced by Russian Social Democracy. This connection also becomes apparent in many of the presented documents. Some of the documents are articles or reports written by Russian Caucasian socialist militants like the Armenian Khachaturian (vol. I, p. 131-135) or the Georgian Tria (vol. I, p. 141-149), who fought on the side of the revolutionaries during the Constitutional Revolution in Iran and gave first hand accounts of their experiences. These accounts attest to the intricate linkage between militants on both sides of the border and to

the hopes many revolutionaries of Russia had in the Constitutional Revolution in Iran. Regarding the Constitutional Period before the First World War there also some declarations and appeals by Iran's first well established Social Democratic group, the transnationally organised Social Democratic Party of Iran (*Firqah-ye Ejtama'iyun-e Amiyun-e Iran – Mojahed*). Especially the appeal made to the International Proletariat at the dawn of the coup d'etat against the Iranian parliament and the subsequent Russian invasion of Northern Iran at the end of 1911 makes the internationalist perspective of these early socialist organisations clear. Similarly the correspondence between members of the Tabriz Social Democratic group, a young and small organisation predominantly made up of Iranian Armenians, and Karl Kautsky and Georgi Plekhanov, two of the most famous leaders of the Second International, points to the international networks already at play in this early stage of the Iranian Left (vol. I, p. 123-127, 131-139). The protocols of the conference held by the Tabriz group in the second half of 1908 attest to the high level of Marxist theoretical debate regarding the state of Iranian society and the political tasks at hand (vol. I, p. 128-130). Chaqueri makes it clear that this dimension, i.e. a certain depth of Marxist theoretical thinking, is quite unique in the history of the Iranian Left.¹ He is very outspoken in his criticism of the shallowness of many leftist currents in the 20th century, particularly pointing to the Tudeh party in the 1940s and 50s, which degraded itself to generally repeating the foreign political line of the Soviet government and in consequence was unable to develop its own theoretical and political concept, regarding the challenges in Iran as well as the political nature of Soviet Russia. The same criticism is further extended to the whole historiography of the Iranian Left, as will be discussed further below.

The second part of the documents of the first volume deals with the period which can be identified with the establishment of the Communist movement at the end of the First World War until the outbreak of the Second World War. In regard to Iran this covers first the establishment of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Gilan or the Jangali Movement, on which Chaqueri wrote an important and extensive monograph in the 1990s,² secondly the Iranian Communist Party. The latter existed from 1920 until the 1930s when it was crushed by Reza Shahs repression against all forms of opposition. As so often, an important source of information on political movements in the non-European and semi-colonial world, particularly regarding those movements which had to operate in the underground and in opposition to the established power system, stems from the reports written by proponents of the various imperial powers, being either Russian, American or British. Therefore Chaqueri also included several documents with a specific reference to Britain at the end of the first volume.

The second volume more or less starts where the first volume ended, with the year 1941, i.e. the year of Reza Shahs abdication and Iran's occupation by the allied forces, up until 1957. Its focus, in regard to the historical overview offered at the beginning as well as to the documents in the second part, deals much more narrowly with one single organisation, the Tudeh party. Chaqueri discusses the development of this organisation from its inception during the Second World War and ends in the period of the aftermath of the 1953 coup d'etat against the democratic nationalist government of Mohammad Mosaddegh. Chaqueri provides an intense discussion on the question of the relationship between the Tudeh party, which only in 1949 established itself as a Marxist party and prior to this point declared itself

¹ In his earlier works Chaqueri gave a lot of attention to the forgotten or consciously marginalized role of Iranian Armenians in the Iranian Left. See: Cosroe Chaqueri (ed.): *The Armenians of Iran. The Paradoxical Role of a Minority in a Dominant Culture*, Cambridge, Harvard Center for Middle Eastern Studies, 1998.

² Cosroe Chaqueri: *The Soviet Socialist Republic of Iran, 1920-1921. Birth of the Trauma*, Pittsburgh and London, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995.

to be a popular democratic-nationalist party, and the Soviet government in Russia. Based on his archival research, Chaqueri comes to the conclusion that the Soviets were from the beginning instrumental in founding the Tudeh party and remained the main force in directing its policies. Several incidents highlight this fact, particularly the support for a Soviet-Iranian oil agreement, the support for the Autonomous Government in Iranian Azerbaijan in 1945-46 as well as the support given to the government of Premier Ahmad Qavam in 1946. In all cases the main reason for the support given by the Tudeh party to these projects, often despite the original opinion of many Tudeh leaders, were the geopolitical interests of the Soviet government which exerted pressure by its agents inside the party. Additionally the party gained very little through these policies. Quite the opposite, they lost a lot of common ground with the Iranian masses because they were increasingly identified with Soviet interests in Iran and therefore outside of the nationalist camp fighting against any form of imperial penetration.

Chaqueri therefore is clear in his judgement regarding the Tudeh party, being highly critical of its Soviet compliance. Similarly he casts doubt on the historiography of the Iranian Left. The history of the Left in the 20th century has been the subject of many controversies. One main reason for this was the effort of Stalinist or Soviet historiography. Its aim was mostly to construe a version of history which didn't strive to bring light into the shadows of the Left's history in order to understand and learn, instead serving the purpose of ideologically fostering Soviet hegemony. The historiography of the Iranian Left has therefore been the victim of ideologically motivated research, either by its adversaries, such as bourgeois, monarchist or Islamist forces, or by its affiliates of the Stalinist camp. Chaqueri as an Iranian leftist historian tried to face this situation throughout his works and relentlessly attacked Stalinist misconstructions of Iran's history. His accomplishments in this effort are tremendous.

Nevertheless, Chaqueri also pushes the boundaries in this context. As a more or less self-proclaimed militant academic highly critical of Iranian historiography, at times he seems to exaggerate the task of confronting different historic interpretations. His fierce attitude left him many times in a difficult position, sidelining him from the historiographical discourse and therefore marginalizing him in the academic field. One example is given in the second volume by himself, pointing to the conflict with Stephanie Cronin, editor of a volume on the history of the Iranian Left, around the question of the inclusion of a paper by Chaqueri. Finally he rejected the inclusion of his paper since he was confronted with the wish to tone down his criticism as it apparently was "tending sometimes to the abusive." (vol. II, p.231). The pity in all of this is, that his criticism of many aspects of certain historians of the Iranian Left are as valuable as his wordings offensive. A good example for this dilemma is the aforementioned article dealing with the historiography of the Iranian Left (vol. II, p. 231-347). In this piece he confronts certain historians, particularly the well-known Ervand Abrahamian, for their uncritical handling of Stalinist narratives about the Iranian Left. This criticism is well grounded, but the tone truly leaves little room for a true and respectful discourse in the historic field. In a way this reproduces a certain problematic aspect of the Iranian Left, criticized by Chaqueri himself, i.e. the personal rivalry and petty competitiveness between certain historic figures of the Iranian Left with the aim to distinguish oneself from the others (vol. II, p. 284).

To sum up, with "The Left in Iran" Chaqueri succeeded in collecting highly valuable documents on the Iranian Left, some of them translated for the first time into English. Even though some important documents seem to be missing, such as the programme and the

statute of the early Social Democratic Party of Iran,³ in general he did a magnificent job and proved again to be one of the most competent historians of the Iranian Left. The wide range of documents at his disposal which he collected through decades of research in archives all over the world sometimes leads to an inflationary use of primary sources inside his own texts. Therefore at times documents seem to be not properly marked as original documents, which makes it hard to find and identify them, even though they nevertheless are of high value for historians. But in the end this does not belittle the overall achievement in Chaqueri's effort.

At the end there remains the necessity to mourn. Cosroe Chaqueri died after a long illness on June 30 2015. This illness had already slowed him down many times, leading to long periods in which he was rarely able to publish. His final record attests to his qualities as an outstanding historian of the Iranian Left. In regard to the volumes "The Left in Iran" it must be mentioned that his passing away leaves his task incomplete. After the first two volumes Chaqueri together with *Revolutionary History* announced the last part of the series which would have dealt with the Iranian Left up until the revolution of 1979. This task will have to be picked up by other historians of Iran, even though it will be difficult to find somebody with similar qualities as a diligent archival researcher as Cosroe Chaqueri.

³ To my knowledge they were reprinted only in German in the 1970s by Schapour Ravasani: Sowjetrepublik Gilan. Die sozialistische Bewegung im Iran seit Ende des 19. Jh. bis 1922, Berlin, Basis Verlag, 1973. In my published thesis I also reprinted these insightful documents in: Ramin Taghian: Grenzgänger des Sozialismus. Die transnationale Dimension der frühen sozialistischen Bewegung im Iran (1905-1911), Wien, Promedia, 2014.