# Introduction

## Writing the Sociohistorical Chronicle of Iranian Oil

The discovery of oil in Iran in 1908, at the dawn of the Twentieth Century, often referred to as the 'Century of Oil', marked the inception of a significant transformation in the history of Iran. This transformation was accompanied by the subsequent establishment of an extensive oil refinery, shipping infrastructure, and industrial settlements in the southwestern regions of Iran. As the nineteenth century transitioned into the Twentieth Century, the dominance of heavy oil gradually replaced coal as the primary energy source in Western economies.

Simultaneously, the demand for Iranian oil witnessed a remarkable upsurge during the First World War, leading to a substantial expansion in the workforce and related labour engagements within the oil sector. This influx of labourers into the burgeoning oil communities laid the foundation for a burgeoning societal stratum. This stratum was characterised by a discernible class consciousness, which intersected with elements of the pre-existing communal and tribal identities of its constituents.

While the colossal scale and significance of petroleum, along with its undeniable economic and strategic ramifications, are beyond dispute, the intricate complexities intrinsic to its extraction and processing, contingent upon the diligent labour and expertise of both men and women operating within the multifaceted sectors of this industry, have often been overshadowed and underestimated by scholars.

The oil industry in Iran evolved within a complex web of interrelated formative relationships that underwent substantial transformations throughout the Twentieth Century. Labour relations in Iran, particularly within this critical industrial sector, were shaped by a succession of evolving dynamics involving the national state and a significant colonial entity (Anglo-Persian Oil Company, 1908–35; Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, 1935–54; British Petroleum, 1954-present), the national state and a Consortium of multinational corporations (1954–73), the national state and the local and national labour force employed in the industry, as well as the intricate interactions between the Oil Company and its workforce. Consequently, these relationships had a multifaceted impact



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on both the formation of labour and the dynamics of labour relations at various historical junctures. Undeniably, the everyday lives of the workers profoundly influenced their collective and individual aspirations and activities.

The historiography of Iran's oil industry has largely been framed by political narratives, predominantly analysed through the lens of Eurocentric structural-functionalist theories of modernity. These narratives have typically provided a top-down perspective, focusing primarily on state-society relations. This study, however, endeavours to offer an alternative history of oil in Iran a social history meticulously woven from the intricate tapestry of Iran's oil industry. It is a study that delves into the reciprocal influence of modernisation and social change within the Iranian context, but from a grassroots perspective, emphasising the experiences and contributions of individuals at the heart of this transformative industry.

## Examining the Subsequent Influence of Oil in Iran

The fall of the Safavid Empire (1501–1722) in Iran, coinciding with the dawning era of global industrialisation and integration spanning from 1750 to 1900, represented a critical juncture in Iran's historical trajectory. This period marked the inception of the Industrial Revolution, a transformative epoch characterised by significant global changes. The dissolution of the Safavid Empire had profound implications, triggering a resurgence of tribal politics, and engendering a schism in the evolution of capitalism within Iran.

This political fragmentation and economic decline endured for nearly a century, casting a long shadow over Iran's development. It was not until the threshold of the nineteenth century, with the establishment of the Qajar Empire (1796–1925), that Iran embarked on a path towards reclaiming the territorial and political coherence reminiscent of the Safavid era. However, this newly constituted empire quickly found its territorial integrity under constant threat in an era when emerging colonial powers aggressively sought to expand their territorial dominions. In this challenging geopolitical landscape, the frontiers of the Qajar Empire proved to be inherently vulnerable, given the relentless territorial ambitions of the colonial powers. For Iran, the treaties of 1813 and 1828, which resulted from protracted military conflicts with the Tsarist Empire, marked a pivotal juncture in its history. These treaties not only entailed the complete relinquishment of its territorial holdings in the Caucasus but also initiated a gradual yet profound transformation in its political and socio-economic landscape.

As the Twentieth Century dawned, Iran found itself ensnared in a semi-colonial status, subject to the interests and machinations of two dominant powers: Britain and Tsarist Russia. These powers regarded Iran as their own sphere of influence, where they wielded considerable political and economic

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control. In response to this semi-colonial subjugation, the Twentieth Century in Iran unfolded as an era characterised by a series of revolutions.

The Constitutional Revolution (1905–1909) brought about profound transformations in the socio-economic and sociocultural fabric of the nation. Its primary objective was the restructuring of the political landscape, the abolition of the monarchical regime, the establishment of the rule of law, and the imposition of accountability in the exercise of both political and economic power. During this period, a foundational principle emerged, asserting the equality of all citizens before the law, although it should be noted that this equality initially extended only to male citizens. Additionally, the Constitutional Revolution aimed to modernise Iranian society by fostering the industrialisation of the nation's economy. However, the path of the Constitutional Revolution was fraught with formidable challenges. Initially, the absence of a strong central state hindered its progress. Subsequently, it encountered resistance and coercion from Tsarist Russia. The outbreak of the First World War further complicated matters, casting additional obstacles in its path.

The discovery of petroleum reserves in the southern region of Iran in the year 1908 coincided with the unfolding of the Constitutional Revolution, marking a pivotal juncture in history that significantly elevated the geopolitical importance of the nation. As the outbreak of the First World War abruptly terminated what Karl Polányi aptly referred to as the European 'hundred years' peace', a transformation of paramount consequence unfolded on the global stage.[1] This transformation was characterised by a momentous shift from coal to oil as the primary energy source across various domains, including technology, military applications, and industrial sectors. This paradigmatic shift carried profound implications for the strategic relevance of Iran and the Persian Gulf region, distinguished by its possession of the world's most extensive oil reserves.

Oil, in this context, emerged as a remarkable and strategically significant commodity, shaped not merely by geological processes but also by intricate social and economic factors. On a global scale, oil capitalism emerged as the pre-eminent economic system, supplanting the financial capitalism that had predominated during the preceding nineteenth century. This ascendancy of oil capitalism endured throughout the entirety of the Twentieth Century exerting a pervasive and enduring influence on global affairs.

The pivotal role played by Iranian oil during the First World War profoundly reshaped the trajectory of the nation throughout the Twentieth Century. The annals of Iranian history bear witness to the confluence of geopolitical events and the enduring significance of this invaluable resource. Indeed, two notable coups d'état in 1921 and 1953, as well as the seismic reverberations of the second revolution in 1979, are all intrinsically linked, either directly or indirectly, to the omnipresent spectre of oil.

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## Contours of Social History

The composition and dissemination of social history have consistently engendered profound political contention across various global contexts. It is evident that historians and scholars grounded in historical inquiry have increasingly recognised and engaged with three key concerns. The initial concern emanates from the imperative to craft social histories that counteract prevailing paradigms of political historiography. The endeavour to write social histories serves as an antidote to the narratives centred around towering figures, ruling lineages, or fervent nationalist uprisings. To exemplify, the emergence of nationalist historiography, which gained momentum during the latter part of the nineteenth century in Europe and gradually assumed prominence within Iran, stands as a relatable illustration.

Within this framework, political celebrities were depicted as genuine national icons, epitomising the collective consciousness of the entirety of society. These nationalist historiographic accounts recounted the saga of the political elite and their undisputed involvement in the nationalist enterprise. Within the context of modern Iran, the composition of nationalist histories was purposefully underpinned by a reclamation of identity and a rediscovery of the privileged agents designated, according to such narratives, with the preservation of the homeland's integrity.[2]

The second concern has prompted the imperative to scrutinise the interplay between politics and society across all strata – a task that conventional political history often neglects to comprehensively address. Consequently, social history, or more appropriately termed societal history, provides the essential arena wherein the documentation of the past through the lens of these complex interactions becomes acceptable.

The third concern implicitly recognises that contemporary politics exercise a significant influence over the outlines of historiography. Within a world characterised by the dominance of nation state constructs, the delineation of a nation's collective identity emerges as a politically driven endeavour fostered by political historiographical discourse. This undertaking endeavours to bridge the disparities existing between a nation's factual or ideational historical narrative and its current political actuality. Consequently, nation states necessitate the services of historians to validate their established political hierarchy and power configuration. As a result, the past, whether remote or proximate, is subject to reinterpretation by historians through the lens of present-day political pragmatism.

The exploration of nation state historiography brings a pair of essential inquiries. Might social history find applicability within the confines of the nation state? Moreover, surpassing the former query in urgency, can social history, particularly in its contemporary sociocultural manifestations, armed with broader discursive frameworks than those traditionally proffered by

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canonical social historians, engage with investigations extending beyond the boundaries of the nation state? The response to the initial query emerges rather conspicuously, as a considerable number of social historians operate within the established boundaries of the nation state. However, their distinctiveness lies in their endeavour to excavate national histories from the perspective of the marginalised or less dominant segments of society. Noteworthy instances encompass those social historians who undertake the task of documenting the metamorphosis of subjects into citizens through the complex tapestry of nation state formation. As posited by Ranajit Guha, the emergence of a nation transpires not solely as an outcome of elite exertions, but equally as a consequence of the struggles waged by the subaltern groups.

However, the latter question is of great importance. Can the field of social history, especially in its contemporary sociocultural iterations, equipped with broader and more inclusive discursive frameworks than those traditionally offered by conventional social historians, cope with research that transcends the boundaries of the nation state?[3]

Addressing the latter query, it is imperative for historians to acknowledge the omnipresence of numerous social dynamics that transcend national boundaries. Among these are the transnational circulation of people, the spreading of political ideals and aspirations, and the proliferation of popular cultures.[4] Furthermore, social historiography that extends beyond the limitations of the nation state can actively forge connections with a plethora of social science disciplines, encompassing fields such as development studies, tribal studies, women's studies, and various sub-disciplines within history, including but not limited to labour history, agricultural history, business history, and family history. It turns out that reconstructing everyday life in a given context can actually enhance social historiography by giving it an essential layer of depth and insight.

Within the boundary of these argument, I consider social history as a historical study that focuses on the lives, experiences, and activities of ordinary people rather than just political elites and major events. For me, social history aims to understand the social, cultural, economic, and everyday aspects of a society. The 'agency' in this study refers to the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and take actions that shape their own lives and society. Here my reference to 'Subaltern agency' refers to the actions and perspectives of marginalised and less powerful groups, often hidden from traditional historical narratives.[5]

By addressing these challenges and working towards a more comprehensive and rigorous approach, the social historiography of oil in Iran can be advanced. This would involve understanding not just political events, but also societal structures, cultural practices, and the lives of ordinary people during 1908–79.

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### The Role of Oil in Shaping Iranian Society

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, one of the paramount challenges confronting British enterprises on a global scale was the quest for the discovery and mastery of dependable and secure reservoirs of oil. Imperial Russia's possession of the Baku oilfield, the world's second-largest known oil deposit at that time, following the United States oilfields, granted Russia a dominant position in the burgeoning and burgeoning energy market. British competitors were resolute in their determination to alter this state of affairs by embarking on a mission to uncover and exploit fresh oilfields across the globe.

In May 1901, the British determination reached a successful culmination when William K. D'Arcy secured an exclusive concession. This agreement granted him comprehensive rights to explore, extract, process, commercialise, transport, and sell oil and all its derivatives throughout the extensive territories of the Persian Empire. Seven years later, in the early hours of a spring day, on the 26 May 1908, after months of rigorous exploration and excavation in the southwestern region of Iran, one of the wells situated in the foothills of the Zagros Mountains, not far from the remnants of a Parthian temple known as Takht-e Soleyman, ultimately struck oil.

It is noteworthy that the discovery of oil in southern Iran occurred concomitantly with a period known in the Iranian constitutional movement as 'Minor Tyranny'. This era was marked by the Iranian Parliament being subjected to bombardment by Russian forces under the directive of Qajar King, Mohammad-Ali Shah, which transpired in the aftermath of the Constitutional Revolution in Iran. However, it is intriguing to observe that the historical records within the oil archives do not make any reference to this synchronicity. This omission can be attributed to the British perspective, which owing to its supremacy in the region, regarded Southern Iran as a separate colonial entity, substantially disconnected from the wider political dynamics unfolding across the nation.

Following the successful discovery of oil deposits, the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC) faced an immediate and formidable challenge: the transportation of oil from the wellhead to the global market, either in its crude or refined state. In pursuit of maximising profitability, the company made the strategic decision to conduct oil refining operations within Iran. The geographical advantage of proximity to the Persian Gulf granted APOC convenient access to the international market. Along the Persian Gulf's coastline, Abadan Island, situated in the north-western corner and adjacent to the waterway of Arvandrud, provided excellent anchorages for shipping tankers. It emerged as an ideal location for the construction of a refinery.

The commencement of construction on the Abadan Refinery was initiated in October 1909. Merely three months later, in January 1910, an ambitious project was launched, entailing the construction of approximately 220 kilometres

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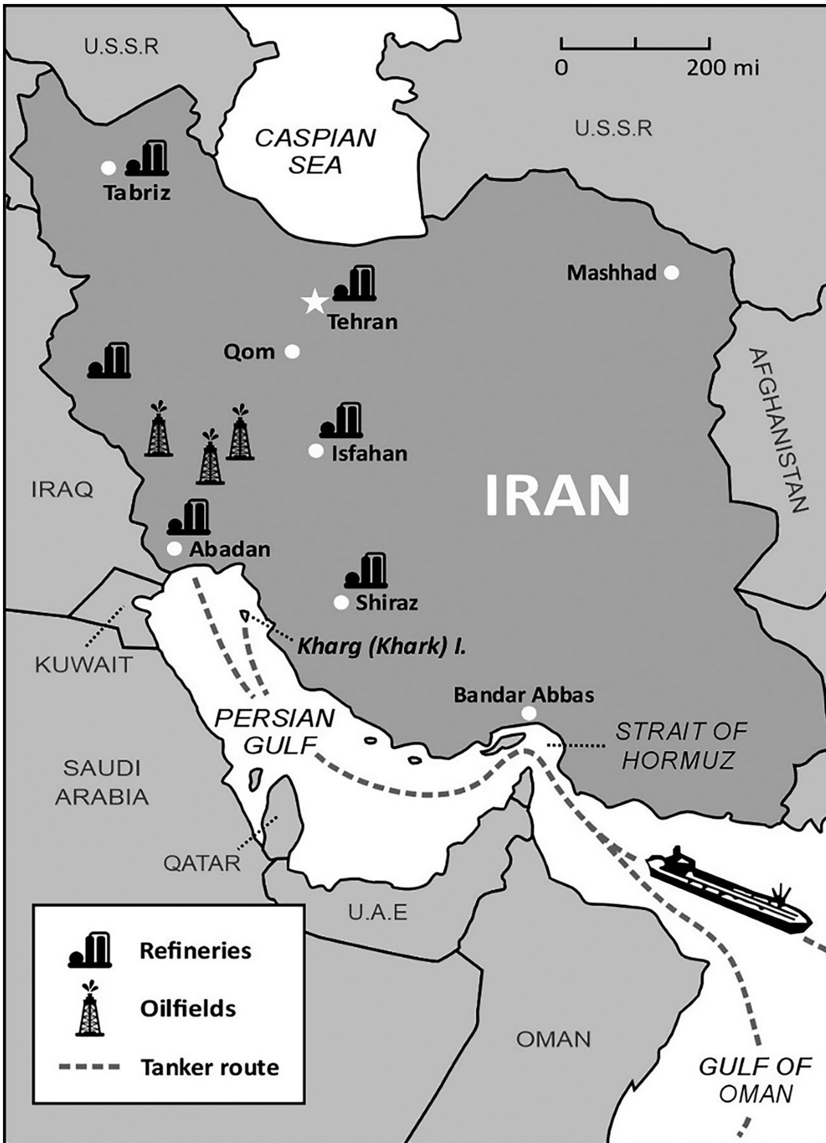


**Map I.1** Iran in the Twentieth Century

of pipelines to facilitate the transportation of oil from the fields of Masjed-Soleyman to Abadan.

This endeavour marked the onset of an extensive construction effort that ushered in a new chapter in Iran's labour history. Roads, pipelines, an oil

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**Figure I.1** Laying pipeline to transport oil from Masjed-Soleyman to Abadan, 1910

refinery, shipping docks, and entire company towns were established, signifying a monumental transformation in the industrial landscape of the region.

With its complete monopoly over oil mining, production, and marketing, the APOC embarked on an extensive labour recruitment campaign within the region. The bulk of its workforce was sourced from the tribal-pastoralist and village-based labouring communities. This new labour force was subjected to advanced industrial labour discipline, ultimately giving rise to the initial clusters of the working class within the Persian/Iranian oil industry.

From the very outset of the oil discovery, it became evident that a project of such magnitude would necessitate a skilled labour force, a resource that Iran lacked at that time. The initial group of Indian migrant workers who became part of the Iranian oil industry were directly transferred from the Yangon Refinery, facilitated through the coordination of the Burmah Oil Company. In Iran, these workers hailing from Burma were collectively referred to as 'Ranguny', a distinction from other Indian migrants.

With the establishment of the Abadan Refinery in 1909, the population of Indian migrant workers saw a steady increase. The recruitment of labourers from India continued and even intensified notably during the First World War. By the conclusion of the war, the expanded contingent of Indian migrant workers engaged in the Iranian oil industry hailed from various regions across India.

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The conclusion of the First World War marked the end of what had been somewhat ironically termed the 'long peace of the nineteenth century'. The war signalled the breakdown of an international system that had been constructed around high finance and marked the culmination of the industrialisation of warfare, following a period of escalating capitalist competition and transformative technological advancements. Just before the war erupted, a global transition took place in industry, armies, and naval forces as they shifted from using coal to oil fuels, resulting in an exponential surge in the demand for petroleum products. The extraction and refining of substantial and cost-effective supplies of petroleum were fundamental prerequisites for this global shift, and the Iranian oil industry, managed by the APOC emerged as the principal supplier of this new energy source in the Persian Gulf. The Iranian oil thus became not only an economically vital resource for British interests worldwide but also a strategically significant military asset.

The aftermath of the war was equally momentous. Eric Hobsbawm aptly labels the period encompassing the First World War and its aftermath as 'the age of catastrophe',[6] attributing its destructiveness to its resemblance to unrestrained competitive capitalism, driven by the relentless pursuit of limitless accumulation, acquisition, and global expansion. The war engulfed the general public as conscripts, workers, and cannon fodder, ultimately forcing them to bear the costs of the carnage. Paradoxically, however, the sheer scale of the war brought about an expansion of the public sphere and unintentionally paved the way for greater political participation by the working classes and ordinary citizens.

This pivotal shift in political dynamics coincided with global structural changes in corporate capitalism, compelling the state and large corporations such as APOC to reassess labour and labour relations from an entirely new perspective. In this reconfigured landscape, industrial workers were no longer viewed solely as anonymous producers of surplus value but increasingly as 'human capital' and, ultimately, as political citizens whose votes and political actions could influence laws and policies.

As the First World War came to an end, Iran remained entangled in the aftermath of the Constitutional Revolution. The post-war political climate in Iran was characterised by surges of anti-colonial nationalism, reformist movements, and radical regional developments. In the aftermath of the First World War, a new political paradigm emerged in Iran, with a central focus on diminishing provincial and tribal autonomy. In 1921, Reza Khan, a commander of a local army unit, orchestrated a coup d'état, and four years later, he ascended to power as the new king, establishing the Pahlavi dynasty. Reza Shah's rule was characterised by an authoritarian monarchy built upon a centralised governance model. Employing an approach often described as authoritarian modernisation, he embarked on an ambitious modernisation agenda, marked by the rapid urbanisation and industrialisation of the nation.

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While facing pressure from the Iranian government, the APOC was obligated to enhance the working and living conditions of oil labourers. Nevertheless, the government prevented labour from acting independently as a participant in the modernisation process. These policies gave rise to a tripartite dynamic, outlining the intricate interplay between the state, labour, and the Oil Company. Concurrently, as the king's modernisation initiatives gained momentum, the role of oil underwent a transformation, shifting from being primarily an export commodity to becoming a fundamental resource designated for supporting state-sponsored economic development.

Nonetheless, it would be an oversimplification to confine Reza Shah and his statesmen's perspective on oil solely to its revenue generation for economic change. As we will explore further in this study, the labour and daily lives of oil industry workers were integral components of the economic development program of that era, even though they did not always receive the priority they deserved in practice. For instance, when Reza Shah visited the southern Iran oil industry in 1924, prior to ascending to the throne, he expressed profound disappointment upon discovering that not a single Iranian expert was employed at the Abadan Refinery.

Following Reza Shah's rise to power, his new government promoted territorial-state nationalism as a means to exalt the authoritarian modernisation program and the fresh state-building initiative. State-sponsored nationalism had a significant impact on the oil industry, as it exerted pressure on the APOC to enhance working and living conditions within the sector and expedite Iranianisation by training Iranian workers and replacing Indians with Iranians.

The new agreement reached in 1933 between the Iranian government and APOC, which effectively annulled the D'Arcy concession of 1901, placed a strong emphasis on the earlier demand that APOC should recruit artisans, technicians, and commercial staff from among the Iranian populace. According to the Iranian press, the cancellation of the D'Arcy concession was viewed as an act of 'political emancipation' and a 'new chapter in Iranian honour'. This development not only returned the 'national wealth' to the country but also marked the end of a protracted era of favouritism towards Indian employees.

The influx of this new workforce into the burgeoning oil industry resulted in rapid industrialisation and significant demographic shifts. The emergence of oil towns brought about substantial changes in almost every aspect of social relations, social organisation, and government administrative structures, both at the local and national levels.

Abadan, characterised as a tripartite city, was spatially segmented according to the residency of British, Indian, and Iranian communities. This division was founded on the principles of social stratification imposed by British colonialism. A highly stratified ethnic hierarchy prevailed, a hierarchy that British employees of APOC brought with them from their home countries and from

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India. The city was divided into three main ethnic groups, with Europeans at the top, Indians in the middle, and native Iranians at the bottom. This ethnic segregation was consistently maintained, even as new neighbourhoods were added to the city due to the expansion of the oil industry, the extension of the refinery, and changes in employment policies.

Crossing these rigid ethnic boundaries was possible on certain occasions, such as when higher-ranking Indians (and later, Iranians) were invited to attend official ceremonies, gatherings, or worship services with the European community. However, mixing across ethnic borders was generally discouraged, and segregation was promoted as the preferred practice.

With the onset of the Second World War, Iran's government adopted a policy of neutrality, which was respected for two years by both the British and the Soviets. However, as the German Eastern Front began to crumble, the British and Soviet forces invaded Iran on 25 August 1941. While the official pretext for the invasion was accusing Reza Shah of having pro-German sympathies, it is evident that both the British and the Soviet Union had long-standing desires to gain unrestricted access to Iran's oil resources, located in the north and south of the country. The invasion of Iran provided a strategic opportunity for both powers to pursue these longstanding ambitions.

The occupation of Iran by Great Britain and the Soviet Union in 1941 disrupted the course of authoritarian modernisation in Iran and had a profound impact on Reza Shah's centralised authority, eventually leading to his abdication in favour of his son, Mohammad-Reza Shah Pahlavi. Indeed, this transitional period created a more conducive environment for the expansion of political open space and the emergence of social movements that contributed to the strengthening of civil society in Iran. One significant aspect of this development was the rapid formation of political parties and trade unions throughout the country. The labour movement, in particular, gained prominence, primarily within Iran's major industries during that era.

Within the context of the oil industry the organised labour movement for better working and living conditions, launched significant initiatives, including strikes, sit-ins, and public demonstrations. This increasing political awareness, combined with heightened labour activism, the emergence of trade unions, and growing class consciousness, played a pivotal role in the eventual nationalisation of the oil industry in 1951.

The necessity to ramp up oil production to meet the wartime needs of the Allied forces collided with the shortage of available labour within the oil industry. In addition to the workers directly employed by the AIOC, there were also individuals who were assigned specific tasks on a casual or seasonal basis by the company. These casual workers, or as they were called, the non-contract workers, were not considered part of the AIOC's regular labour force and were not included in the company's official statistics. Nonetheless, due to the scarcity of available labour, the AIOC had no choice but to return to its previous

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practice of recruiting migrant workers, primarily from India, to fill both skilled and unskilled positions within the industry. This migration of Indian workers played a significant role in addressing the workforce shortages faced by the AIOC during this period.

During the Second World War, the labouring poor in Iran experienced intolerable living conditions due to widespread famine, inflation, and the ever-increasing cost of living. The non-contract workers, along with the majority of the salaried registered workers and waged contractor workers, were still living in tents, huts, or in a shantytown known as *Kaghazabad* (Paper Town). These dwellings lacked basic amenities such as running water and electricity.

In a report submitted to the Iranian government by the AIOC, the company admitted that despite the sharp increase in the number of employees in the oil industry during the war, no measures had been taken to provide decent housing for the workers. Additionally, during the war, Iranians faced the threats of diseases and epidemics. The oil industry, which operated two hospitals in Abadan with a total of 350 beds and one in Masjed-Soleyman with 86 beds, had to contend with new diseases such as typhus, along with longstanding and more enduring ones such as trachoma, malaria, tuberculosis, and the plague.

For about thirty years since the initial discovery of oil in 1908, the absence of a unified platform to represent the interests of labour allowed the AIOC to address issues related to workers' living and working conditions on an individual rather than a collective basis. This approach extended to matters such as labour recruitment, wages, education, healthcare, housing, and welfare. The Oil Company had the freedom to terminate workers without notice, and there was no recourse for workers to appeal against unfair dismissals. Despite several signs indicating the emergence of a nascent labour movement during this period, the AIOC's labour policies exhibited little to no inclination to adapt or change accordingly.

The working and living conditions of the Oil Company's employees during this period laid the foundation for a series of significant labour protests in the 1940s and early 1950s. Some of these protests, as elaborated in detail in this volume, escalated into the bloodiest labour uprisings not only in Iran but also across the entire region. These protests were a direct result of the harsh working conditions, lack of collective bargaining power, and the general dissatisfaction among labourers, culminating in violent confrontations with severe consequences.

The declaration of the nationalisation of the Iranian oil industry on 20 March 1951, was not solely the product of determined efforts by certain political elites, as commonly emphasised in the historiography of Iranian oil nationalisation. Equally important was the sustained pressure from below, primarily driven by oil workers.

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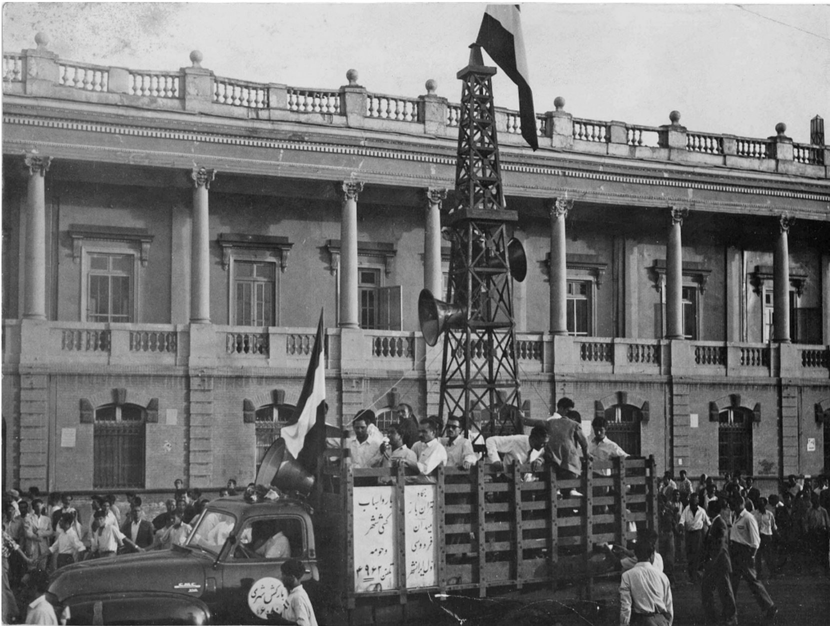

**Figure I.2** Demonstration in support of oil nationalisation, Tehran, 1951

With the departure of all European and a majority of Indian employees of the AIOC in October 1951, the culmination of oil nationalisation marked the end of forty-five years of British dominance within the Iranian oil industry. This transition underscored the significant role played by both political leaders and grassroots movements, particularly oil workers, in shaping the course of this historic development. However, the initial euphoria surrounding this nationalisation was short-lived, as the 1950s witnessed one of the most challenging periods of economic decline and political repression in the country's history. The coup d'état of 1953 and the subsequent denationalisation of the oil industry's management in 1954 emerged as major factors contributing to this era of repression and stagnation.

One of the immediate outcomes of the August 1953 coup d'état was the widespread repression that extended into all corners of the political sphere in Iran. The return of autocratic rule marked the end of twelve years of practising participatory politics. The overthrow of Mosaddeq's government not only ushered in a new political era in Iran but also marked a transformative juncture in which other international oil corporations, notably those from the United States, entered the Iranian oil industry. The coup d'état of 1953 wrought a transformative shift in Iran's political landscape, yielding profound implications for the nation's destiny in the decades that followed.

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In the aftermath of the Second World War, the global landscape experienced a profound transformation characterised by the onset of the Cold War, a restructuring of political alliances, and a focused endeavour aimed at economic and social reconstruction, predominantly through the establishment of the developmental states. In the bipolar context of the Cold War, the United States delivered a stark message to its allies in the Global South: initiate comprehensive top-down reforms or risk being overthrown by bottom-up grassroots revolutions that could end their governance!

In August 1961, the Shah conducted a rally in Tehran during which he unveiled his intentions to introduce a comprehensive set of economic reforms. After nearly two years of meticulously assessing various reform options, the Shah officially announced an outline of an authoritarian development plan on 26 January 1963. This proposal was subsequently presented to the public through a referendum. At the heart of these reforms lay a series of extensive socio-economic initiatives, later to become known as the White Revolution.

At the core of the White Revolution lay the central tenet of land reform, aimed at changing prevailing pre-capitalist social relations in rural areas, thereby facilitating a rapid surge in capitalist economic growth. Additionally, the objective was to bypass the pre-industrial stages of societal development, propelling a primarily agrarian-based society into a capitalist one, fully prepared to engage in the global economic arena. Central to this transformative endeavour was the industrialisation of the economy, serving as a fundamental pillar in this process.

This developmental strategy yielded several significant results, most notably an increase in female participation across various professions. There was a rise in the number of female workers, extensive literacy programs were implemented, opportunities for higher education expanded, healthcare services improved, and communication networks were enhanced, among other advancements. These initiatives profoundly influenced population mobility. During this period, a significant phenomenon occurred: the workforce migrated from rural to urban areas. This shift led to a decrease in the agricultural labour force and a corresponding rise in the urban industrial workers.

The rural-to-urban migration led to a substantial influx of hundreds of thousands of villagers into the cities, primarily settling in the suburbs of major urban centres. However, many of these migrants encountered significant challenges in their daily lives, including traditional-modern and rural-urban cultural disconnection, along with a series of material hardships such as a lack of access to essential amenities such as water and electricity in their residential areas. It soon became evident that this concentrated population had the potential to drive significant political change.

In the post-war era, particularly during the 1960s, the United Nations identified it as a time of widespread economic and political reforms on a global scale. Notably, there was a significant linguistic shift during this period: what were

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once referred to as 'underdeveloped countries' were now considered part of the 'developing world'. This reclassification symbolised their potential to overcome longstanding economic stagnation and poverty. However, it is important to acknowledge that the distribution of economic development during this time was not uniform across these nations.

Indeed, Iran's oil revenue played a significant role in facilitating the implementation of development projects. With an estimated increase of 13.6 per cent, oil served as a crucial component in the country's economic reconstruction. The fiscal impact of oil revenues had a dual effect on the Iranian economy: firstly, it provided a substantial source of income for the government to supplement its budgetary expenditures, and secondly, these oil revenues were directed towards various development projects.

In the 1960s and 1970s, oil revenues made a significant contribution to the welfare and living standards of oil industry employees. The economic development during the 1960s brought about a substantial transformation in the lives of oil workers. Their monthly income comprised various components, including basic wages, overtime payments, location-based allowances, housing subsidies, travel allowances, child allowances, and New Year bonuses. The benefits of high income were not exclusive to oil workers; they also had access to affordable and high-quality products offered by the Consumptive Cooperative Organisation of the Oil Industry.

The impact of oil revenues transcended the realms of education, housing, and healthcare, significantly permeating into the domain of leisure for oil workers. However, this impact was not uniform and varied considerably across different regions and social groups. This variation becomes particularly apparent upon analysing the spatial differentiation in the leisure activities of these workers. It is evident that the primary setting for leisure activities among oil workers lay beyond the boundaries of their workplace. Their leisure time was predominantly spent within the private confines of their homes, as well as in public and semi-public spaces, illustrating a diverse range of environments for relaxation and recreation outside of their professional duties.

In conjunction with the economic advancements facilitated by the developmental state, there existed a notable disparity between economic and political progress. Iran of 1960s and 1970s witnessed considerable economic growth and substantial socio-economic transformations. However, this era was markedly devoid of corresponding political evolution. The landscape lacked robust representation of political and trade unions, as well as independent and non-governmental entities. The prevailing political climate continued to be characterised by exclusivity and coercive tactics, reminiscent of earlier times. This was in stark contrast to the dynamic shifts occurring within social classes, which anticipated greater synchronicity between economic and political developments. Nonetheless, the political sphere remained marred by the repressive

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aftermath of the 1953 coup d'état, hindering the alignment of economic and political progress.

In the 1940s, the labour movement, aimed at achieving improved living and working conditions, was markedly confrontational, particularly in its challenge to the state. During this period, aligning the demands of labour unions for better living and working conditions with the agendas of political parties was viewed as a hallmark of progress. Advocating for independent labour unions was perceived as an alignment with reactionary forces. However, from the mid-1950s onwards, and leading up to the months preceding the 1979 revolution, the labour movement predominantly adhered to the principles of trade unionism and adopted a more conciliatory rather than confrontational stance.

Interestingly, there were reports indicating that during the strike and protest, workers displayed photographs of the Shah and placards featuring quotes from the Shah, underscoring the role of workers in the White Revolution. Additionally, there was a narrative suggesting that during their meetings, the workers used large posters of the Shah as shields to safeguard themselves from potential attacks by the police and security services. This tactic meant that any would-be assailants would only be able to enter the meeting venue by forcibly tearing down the pictures.

The two decades spanning the 1960s and early 1970s witnessed rapid and substantial socio-economic growth in Iran, facilitated by the rentier developmental state. Concurrently, the nation grappled with an underdeveloped political system. This juxtaposition would later foreshadow the crises that unfolded in the mid-1970s. The uneven distribution of wealth, social services, and opportunities, stemming from this rapid yet unequal growth, inevitably led to the widening of sociopolitical disparities. According to a report prepared by the International Labour Organisation in 1972, Iran was among the countries with the most unequal income distribution. In that year, the average income for the working population in the country stood at 1248 rials. In urban areas, this figure was 1569 rials, while in rural areas, it was 660 rials. Additionally, government civil workers enjoyed an income 2.2 times higher than government-employed workers and 3.4 times higher than workers in the private sector during the same year.

The massive rural-to-urban migration led to the unchecked proliferation of informal squatter settlements, serving as another manifestation of the disproportionate population growth. Over a span of fifteen years, Iran's population swelled from 23 million individuals in 1960 to 34 million individuals in 1974. Cities experienced a twofold increase in population, surging from 8 million to 16 million, while rural areas witnessed a more modest increase from 15 million to 18 million individuals.

The most substantial growth occurred in Tehran, where the population skyrocketed from 2.7 million people to 4.5 million within a single decade, from 1966 to 1976. Due to the rapid influx of migrants, Tehran was unable to serve as an ideal destination for newcomers or adequately meet the needs of its existing

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residents. By the mid-1970s, squatter settlements had reached their zenith, encompassing urban inhabitants within the bounds of the urban economy but remaining largely excluded from it. The proliferation of urban squatter settlements underscored the considerable influence wielded by this demographic trend, arguably even surpassing that of the working class. Consequently, political forces could not afford to disregard the dynamics of this mobile population.

The fifteen years period that commenced with the initiation of the White Revolution in 1962, laying the foundation for new developmental advancements and rapid economic growth until 1976, concluded with an aggravated economic crisis in 1977. Unlike conventional models of revolution, the Iranian Revolution was the product of more than a decade of swift economic expansion followed by a brief phase of economic recession or downturn.[7]

Nonetheless, it would be overly simplistic to attribute the revolution solely to the prominent role of the economic crisis, while overlooking other contributing factors. One such factor was the political impasse resulting from the neglect of political development in parallel with economic progress. Within the framework of authoritarian modernisation, political agency remained confined to the Shah and his political elite. There was no recourse for the populace to hold anyone accountable for the pervasive misconduct of coercive institutions and economic mismanagement. Political parties, unions, and other independent institutions were virtually non-existent. Repression of dissent, corruption, inequality, and misallocation of financial resources compelled either protest or passive acceptance of authoritarian modernisation. The government's inability to address economic disparities and maintain economic stability fuelled discontent.

At the international level, the Iranian Revolution was also shaped by broader geopolitical factors, including the dynamics of the Cold War, Iran's relationship with the United States, and regional power struggles. The significant support provided by the United States to the Iranian government during the Cold War and Western intervention in Iran's internal affairs had such a substantial impact that any significant shift in American policies quickly reverberated within Iran, affecting its political stability or instability. This intricate relationship with the West fuelled anti-government sentiments and gave rise to demands for independence and freedom.

The belated participation of oil industry workers in the sweeping protests that ultimately led to the 1978–79 revolution can be attributed to their relatively comfortable economic circumstances. This prosperity initially made them less inclined, much like their counterparts in larger industries, to engage in the early stages of the protests. However, as the revolutionary tide surged and harnessed the twin forces of coercion against non-participants and the compelling appeal of religious convictions, even those initially hesitant found themselves drawn into the fold. This was the story for those who did not share an affinity with political Islam or the Islamic Revolution but, in the face of the prevailing circumstances, felt compelled to become participants.

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## A Note on Methodology

The methodology employed in this study, which endeavours to present a social history of oil, is inherently complex and interdisciplinary in nature. To address the multifaceted dimensions of this topic, a carefully considered approach was adopted. The methodology encompassed a diverse range of research methods, including archival research, oral history interviews, content analysis of documents and media, as well as quantitative data analysis, among others. This comprehensive approach was essential to capture the rich tapestry of the social history of oil.

Primary and secondary data, essential to this study, were gathered through extensive research activities that spanned across various geographical locations, including Delhi, Mumbai, Tehran, Moscow, London, and Washington. These efforts included visits to archives, such as the BP archive, British National Archives, U.S. National Archives, Indian National Archives, Iran National Archives, and the Archive of Indian Office, which contain a wealth of invaluable historical documents related to the oil industry. While these archives were invaluable sources, a cautious approach was taken to avoid over-reliance on them. Rigorous cross-referencing and verification of sources were undertaken to ensure the reliability of the information.

The theoretical framework guiding this study drew upon concepts from social history, labour history, and the history of everyday life. Additionally, insights from a range of disciplines within the social sciences and humanities were incorporated, enriching the analytical perspective.

Historical periodisation serves as a pivotal determinant of the historiographic methodology employed by scholars in the compilation of history. This concept underscores the inherent differentiation in the approach to periodisation across various historical disciplines. Specifically, the criteria for periodising political history diverge markedly from those applied to social history. While political historians prioritise political events as the primary markers for defining historical epochs, social historians emphasise transformations in work and societal life as the critical determinants. Consequently, a political event might hold negligible significance in the periodisation schema of social history if it fails to effect a tangible change in the daily lives of individuals.

The structure of this book is reflective of a nuanced understanding of periodisation, acknowledging the aforementioned disciplinary distinctions. In a marked departure, this narrative adopts a bottom-up approach, diverging from the traditional top-down historiographical narratives prevalent in the studies of the oil industry in Iran, which are characterised by their detailed chronologies of events. This methodological shift underscores a commitment to foregrounding the lived experiences and societal transformations over the enumeration of political events, thereby offering a more inclusive portrayal of historical periods. Thus, the book embraces a perspective that prioritises the

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broader social fabric and work-related transformations over mere chronological event listing, aligning with the methodological preferences of social history. Therefore, a chronological list has not been provided here.

Throughout the course of this research and writing endeavour, my commitment to maintaining a balanced and objective approach remained steadfast. In doing so, I was reminded of the sagacious counsel of the distinguished Persian historian Abolfazl Beyhaqi, who, over a millennium ago, emphasised the importance of avoiding bias and vindictiveness when presenting historical account of a recently deceased vizier:

> Although I disliked him – by no means. Since my age has reached sixty-five, and I follow him, I should go forth and not say anything in my narrative that I am writing, which leads to bigotry and arrogance, and the readers of this ballad will say: 'Shame on this old man!' Rather, I say it so that the readers will agree with me and not be sarcastic'.[8]

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