

Provincial Revolution and Regional Anti-Colonialism: The Soviets in Iran, 1920–1921

Kayhan A. Nejad 

University of Oklahoma, kanejad@ou.edu

The formation of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Iran (SSRI) marked the Bolsheviks' first serious attempt at exporting revolution beyond the southern borders of the former Russian empire. Located in the northern Iranian province of Gilan, the SSRI was established on June 9, 1920, when the Iranian revolutionaries Mirza Kuchik Khan Jangali (d. 1921) and Ihsan-Allah Khan Dustdar (d. 1939) inaugurated the Revolutionary-Military Committee of the Iranian Soviet Republic (*Revvoensovet persidskoi sovetskoi respubliki*) with the support of the Red Navy and the Caucasian Bureau of the Russian Communist Party (*Kavbiuro*).¹ The breadth of this alliance reflected a moment of optimism, one in which Soviet leadership and revolutionaries abroad saw the potentiality for a Bolshevik advance into west and south Asia. Building on years of joint mobilization between revolutionaries in northern Iran and the Russian south, what role was the SSRI to play in advancing a broader Soviet project in colonized Asia? And how, over the course of a year, did Iran change from a gateway of this project to only another frontier for national liberation and gradualist development?

Within weeks of its formation, the alliance between the Soviets and the Iranian revolutionaries collapsed, sidelining the original leadership of Mirza Kuchik's Jangal Insurgency (1914–20) from provincial affairs. In their place, a broad and often disunited array of Russian, Caucasian, and Iranian revolutionaries—most of whom belonged to the national affiliates of the Russian Communist Party—came to dictate the political course of the SSRI.² Amidst the political breakdown of the Russian Civil War, the communists in the SSRI executed their policies with partial independence from Moscow, and even from their military and diplomatic patrons in the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic (AzSSR). With operational autonomy, they pursued a political project that extended far beyond the Jangalis' social democratic reforms,

The author thanks the peer reviewers, Samuel Hirst, Samuel Hodgkin, and Harriet Murav for their comments on earlier drafts of this article. The author gratefully acknowledges the research support of the Yale MacMillan Center and the Persian Heritage Foundation.

1. Arkhiv vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii (hereafter AVPRF), fond (f.) 04, opis' (op.) 18, papka (p.) 110, delo (d.) 50663, list (l.) 30 (Summary of Russo-Iranian relations until 1921).

2. A small number of Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks joined the communists in Gilan.

Slavic Review 82, no. 2 (Summer 2023)

© The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is unaltered and is properly cited. The written permission of Cambridge University Press must be obtained for commercial re-use or in order to create a derivative work.

doi: 10.1017/slr.2023.165

which included the secularization and standardization of law, organization of public services, and limited land redistribution.³ Rather, the communists sought to export their conception of socialism from the Iranian north to the rest of the country, and even beyond. In the SSRI, this took the form of radically transformative policies of secularization, requisitions of Gilanis' land and material wealth, and expansionist military offensives.

The Gilan communists' designs soon came into conflict with those of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR), which lent its support to the Iranian revolutionary movement only in its early stages. Some studies of this turn, including the foundational accounts of Cosroe Chaquèri and Vladimir Genis, argue that the Soviets forsook their allies on the Iranian left to establish state-to-state relations with London and Tehran.⁴ These arguments echo readings of early Soviet foreign policy that attribute the Soviets' disengagement from anti-colonial movements to their pursuit of state interests, or even their continuation of tsarist colonial practices.⁵ Reflecting on such studies in 1977, Pierre Hassner wrote that historians had spent decades debating the causes of the Soviets' pivot, namely the "crude dichotomies between ideology and power," across scholarship shaped by the Cold War political context.⁶ Several recent studies have negotiated this binary, probing the transformation of Bolshevik revolutionism to Soviet state-building, as well as the eventual fusion of Soviet state and global communist interests, as adaptations of revolutionary principles to geopolitical limitations after 1917.⁷

Prior to 1920, northern Iranian revolutionary movements developed alongside an expanding and unconsolidated Soviet polity that had yet to clearly define its boundaries and interests.⁸ Rather, on the Soviets' southern frontier, the directions of revolution stemmed not only from Moscow, but also from revolutionaries in other Soviet republics and Asian colonies who pursued their own, often discrete visions of national liberation. As demonstrated by

3. See the Jangali platform in Ibrāhīm Fakhrā'ī, *Sardār-i Jangal* (Tehran, 1983), 57–59.

4. Cosroe Chaquèri, *The Soviet Socialist Republic of Iran, 1920–1921: Birth of the Trauma* (Pittsburgh, 1995); Vladimir Genis, *Krasnaia Persiia: Bol'sheviki v Giliane 1920–1921: Dokumental'naia khronika* (Moscow, 2000).

5. The latter argument is applied to Iran in Afshin Partaw, *Gilān va Khīzesh-e Jangal: Tārikh-e Gilān dar Dawrān-e Aḥmad Shāh Qājār* (Rasht, 2012); Mikhail Volodarsky, *The Soviet Union and its Southern Neighbours: Iran and Afghanistan, 1917–33* (Ilford, Eng., 1994).

6. Pierre Hassner, "Soviet Foreign Policy: Ideology and Realpolitik," *Problems of Communism* 26 (November–December 1977): 82; Hassner's piece was shortly followed by the foundational accounts of Richard Debo, *Revolution and Survival: The Foreign Policy of Soviet Russia, 1917–1918* (Toronto, 1979) and T. J. Ulricks, *Diplomacy and Ideology: The Origins of Soviet Foreign Relations* (London, 1978); two decades of subsequent scholarship are reviewed in Jon Jacobson, "Essay and Reflection: On the Historiography of Soviet Foreign Relations in the 1920s," *International History Review* 18, no. 2 (May 1996): 336–57.

7. On the convergence of Soviet state and global communist interests, see Silvio Pons, *The Global Revolution: A History of International Communism 1917–1991*, trans. Allan Cameron (Oxford, 2014); on the establishment and rigidification of early Soviet borders, see Sabine Dullin, *La Frontière Épaisse: Aux Origines Des Politiques Soviétiques 1920–1940* (Paris, 2014); on early antagonism between the Soviets and European states, see Michael Jabara Carley, *Silent Conflict: A Hidden History of Early Soviet-Western Relations* (Lanham, 2014).

8. A notable exception being the Soviets' pursuit of oil. See Sara Brinegar, "Beyond Baku: Soviet Misadventures in Gilan," in "Baku at all Costs: The Politics of Oil in the New Soviet State" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2014): 122–70.

historians such as Cemil Aydin, revolutionary conceptions of pan-Islamism, pan-Asianism, and pro-Japanism circulated across west and south Asia amidst the political transformations of the early twentieth century.⁹ At the end of World War I, Woodrow Wilson's stated commitment to self-determination resonated in Iran and across colonial Asia, arguably eclipsing Leninism before the Paris Peace Conference of 1919–20.¹⁰ The subsequent alignment of some Asian revolutionaries with the Soviets, partially a reaction to the Entente powers' non-recognition of colonial sovereignty, still allowed for the circulation of independent revolutionary conceptions. As demonstrated by historians such as Sabine Dullin, Timothy Harper, and Brigitte Studer, many pro-Soviet revolutionaries, including some under the umbrella of the Comintern, mobilized and organized with a degree of autonomy through the 1920s.¹¹

As the Soviets articulated their anti-colonial ambitions in west and south Asia, Iran emerged as a testing ground for their export of revolutionary theories formulated and implemented primarily in Europe and Russian Asia. Despite the importance of the Iranian front, few works have raised questions about the ideological and material landscape encountered by the Soviets upon their arrival in Gilan. In his study of the Jangal movement and the SSRI, Pezhmann Dailami has devoted the most attention to the programmatic differences between the communists and the Jangalis, arguing that the Jangalis' nationalism could have been reconcilable with early Soviet conceptions of socialism.¹² For a brief historical moment, this may indeed have been the case. As argued by scholars such as Samuel Hirst and Alp Yenen, broad conceptions of anti-colonialism and internationalism wedded the Soviets to a series of national liberation movements across west and south Asia, even if Moscow eventually consolidated ties with reformist governments in Ankara and Kabul, among others, by the early 1920s.¹³ However, with the exception of Mongolia (June 1921), the Soviets had not made such far-reaching

9. Cemil Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia: Visions of World Order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian Thought* (New York, 2007).

10. Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford, 2009), 7; on Iranian demands at the Paris Peace Conference, see "Putting the Record Straight: Vosuq al-Dowleh's Foreign Policy in 1918/19," in Touraj Atabaki and Erik Zürcher, eds., *Men of Order: Authoritarian Modernization Under Atatürk and Reza Shah* (London, 2017), 260–81.

11. Sabine Dullin and Brigitte Studer, "Communism + Transnational: The Rediscovered Equation of Internationalism in the Comintern Years," *Twentieth Century Communism* 14, no. 14 (2018): 66–95; Timothy Harper, *Underground Asia: Global Revolutionaries and the Assault on Empire* (London, 2020); Discussions of revolutionary transnationalism and Moscow's attempts to assert control over (primarily European) revolutionaries by the 1930s are found in Brigitte Studer, *The Transnational World of the Cominternians*, trans. Dafydd Rees Roberts (Basingstoke, Eng., 2015).

12. Pezhmann Dailami, "Nationalism and Communism in Iran: The Case of Gilan, 1915–1921," (PhD diss., University of Manchester, 1994).

13. See Samuel Hirst, "Comrades on Elephants: Economic Anti-Imperialism, Orientalism, and Soviet Diplomacy in Afghanistan, 1921–23," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 22, no. 1 (Winter 2021): 13–40; Samuel Hirst, "Transnational Anti-Imperialism and the National Forces: Soviet Diplomacy and Turkey, 1920–23," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 33, no. 2 (November 2013): 214–26; Alp Yenen, "Internationalism, Diplomacy and the Revolutionary Origins of the Middle East's 'Northern Tier,'" *Contemporary European History* 30, no. 4 (November 2021): 497–512.

interventions in any of these other fronts for national liberation.¹⁴ Thus, to build relations with Iran, the Soviets were obligated to undo—rather than simply delay—their revolutionary project within its borders.

Despite their inconsistent declassification schemes and curated access to materials, the Archive of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation (*Arkhiv vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, AVPRF) and the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (*Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii*, RGASPI), have made available a number of documents that allow for original interpretation of the Soviets' engagement with northern Iranian revolution.¹⁵ Drawing on exchanges between the Jangalis and communists, letters from Soviet leadership in Moscow and the Caucasus, and Persian-language memoirs and diplomatic dispatches, this article begins by narrating the transnationality of Iranian and Russian revolution in the early twentieth century, culminating in the formation of the SSRI. Next, it reconstructs the Gilan communists' takeover of the SSRI and attempts to accelerate the socialist project, with particular attention to Jangali resistance to these designs. Finally, it traces an unsuccessful attempt at Jangali-communist rapprochement in May of 1921, and the sequential Soviet withdrawal and SSRI collapse in the months thereafter.

The Iranian Soviet experiment reflected the shortcomings of revolutionary theory and anti-colonial ambition in a complex political landscape. In their efforts to claim the provincial revolution from the Jangalis, the communists in the SSRI faced determined, ideologically grounded resistance that precluded their consolidation and export of socialism. This article argues that the recurrence of internal conflict catalyzed the Soviets' withdrawal from Gilan and delayed—indefinitely—their planned liberation of a broad region extending from Mesopotamia to India. In the process of collapse, the SSRI signaled the need for socialist and non-socialist revolutionaries to re-envision joint mobilization in west and south Asia: rather than the imposition of one program, their common goal of regional decolonization favored the conciliation of discrete and even oppositional political projects.

Socialism in the Iranian North

The Soviet entry into Gilan marked the culmination of nearly two decades of linkages between revolutionary actors in the Iranian north and Russian south.¹⁶ The Baku Committee of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (*Rossiiskaia sotsial-demokraticheskaia rabochaia partiia*, RSDRP) made its earliest outreach to Iranian labor in 1904, when it aided in the establishment

14. A critical account of Soviet intervention in Mongolia may be found in Bat-Erdene Batbayar, *Twentieth Century Mongolia* (Leiden, Netherlands, 2000); see also Fujiko Isono, "Soviet Russia and the Mongolian Revolution of 1921," *Past & Present* 83, no. 1 (May 1979): 116–40.

15. On pertinent methodological challenges, see Denis Volkov, "Fearing the Ghosts of State Officialdom Past? Russia's Archives as a Tool for Constructing Historical Memories of its Persia Policy Practices," *Middle Eastern Studies* 51, no. 6 (November 2015): 901–21.

16. See the entries in "Revolutionary Russia and Iran," in Stephanie Cronin, ed., *Iranian-Russian Encounters: Empires and Revolutions Since 1800* (London, 2013), 187–258.

of the *Hemmat* (effort) party in an attempt to bring the Muslim underclasses of the South Caucasus into the socialist fold.¹⁷ Initially, these efforts faltered in the face of *okhrana* repression and the successes of the rival Socialist Revolutionaries in recruiting Muslim labor.¹⁸ The emergence of civil conflict in Iran, however, afforded the RSDRP the opportunity to deploy across a broad front that extended beyond the South Caucasus over the porous Russo-Iranian border. During the Revolution of 1905 and its aftermath, up to a thousand Russian revolutionaries fled from the crackdowns of Petr Stolypin (d. 1911) in the Caucasus and Turkestan to Iran.¹⁹ There, they rallied to the defense of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution (1906–11) against an attempted monarchical restoration during the Siege of Tabriz and Recapture of Tehran (1908–09).²⁰ These episodes marked the brief transcendence of ethnic and national antagonisms—as during the Young Turk Revolution of 1908—before their culmination in victory for Iranian constitutionalism.²¹

A series of violent dislocations before and during World War I fractured the multinational revolutionary coalition in the Iranian north. To stabilize its southern periphery and preserve its concessionary interests, tsarist Russia invaded northern Iran in December of 1911, suppressing the Constitutional Revolution.²² At the outset of World War I, relations between Iranian laborers and the Russian revolutionaries markedly diminished: mobilization swept through the Baku oilfields, incapacitating a major strike in 1914; some Iranian revolutionaries aligned with the Central Powers; and, most seriously, the Young Turks implemented their genocidal designs on the Armenian population of the Ottoman Empire, signaling the end of the interethnic unity that had sustained the constitutionalist alliance a half-decade prior.²³ Even in this moment of divisive nationalisms, however, the Ottomans made use of religious appeals to foster anti-Entente movements in the Iranian north. The most

17. Tadeusz Swietochowski, “The Himmät Party: Socialism and the National Question in Russian Azerbaijan, 1904–1920,” *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique* 19, no. 1–2 (Jan–June 1978): 119–42.

18. On the Socialist Revolutionaries in Baku after the Revolution of 1905, see Christopher Rice, “Party Rivalry in the Caucasus: SRs, Armenians and the Baku Union of Oil Workers, 1907–08,” *The Slavonic and East European Review* 67, no. 2 (April 1989): 228–43.

19. On the crackdowns in the Caucasus, see Rice, “Party Rivalry in the Caucasus,” 232.

20. See Moritz Deutschmann, “Cultures of Statehood, Cultures of Revolution: Caucasian Revolutionaries in the Iranian Constitutional Movement, 1906–1911,” *Ab Imperio*, no. 2 (2013): 165–90.

21. On the initial promise of the Young Turk Revolution, see Bedross Der Matossian, *Shattered Dreams of Revolution: From Liberty to Violence in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Stanford, 2014).

22. See Alisa Shablovskaia, “Russian Hubris in Iran: Diplomacy, Clientelism, and Intervention (1907–1912),” *Ab Imperio* 2019, no. 1 (2019): 79–103.

23. On the Armenians in the Constitutional Revolution, see Hourii Berberian, “Traversing Boundaries and Selves: Iranian-Armenian Identities during the Iranian Constitutional Revolution,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 25, no. 2 (August 2005): 279–96; Hourii Berberian, *Armenians and the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1905–1911: “The Love for Freedom Has No Fatherland”* (Boulder, 2001); on the Strike of 1914, see Nicholas Lund, “United in Defeat: The General Strike of 1914,” in his “At the Center of the Periphery: Oil, Land, and Power in Baku, 1905–1917,” (PhD diss., Stanford University, 2013): 277–92.

successful of these, the Jangal Insurgency of Mirza Kuchik, organized under the banner of pan-Islamic unity (*Ittiḥād-i Islām*) until 1918, provided an ideological locus for the Jangalis' and Ottomans' shared anti-Russian war aims.²⁴

The February and October revolutions significantly reconfigured the political trajectory of the Iranian north, reestablishing socialist actors and ideas in a landscape that had trended toward pan-Islamism since 1911. In a repudiation of the tsarist legacy, on November 22, 1917, the Bolsheviks released a proclamation, *Ko vsem trudiashchimsia musul'manam Rossii i Vostoka* (To all the toiling Muslims of Russia and the East), which included a promise to abrogate the unequal treaties imposed on Iran under the previous regime.²⁵ On December 23, 1917, Bolshevik leadership formalized this momentous break in Iranian-Russian relations, announcing in *Izvestiia* their unilateral abrogation of the Anglo-Russian Agreement of 1907 and virtually all of the tsarist-era concessions imposed on Iran.²⁶ “The Soviet government,” Lev Trotskii promised, “will do everything to free Iran from the old agents of tsarism and the imperialist bourgeoisie, who are the enemies of the Iranian and Russian people alike.”²⁷ However important to Iranian aspirations of sovereignty, such pledges were still unactionable, as the Bolsheviks did not actually command the Russian soldiers in the Iranian north. After the October Revolution, northern Iran had emerged as a southern front in the Russian Civil War, as the Bolsheviks sought to wrest control of the Provisional Government consulates from White Russian forces and their British allies.²⁸

Provincial developments—the breakdown of Iranian governmental control and foreign occupation in the Iranian north—opened the door for revolutionary mobilization by the actors who came to lead the SSRI. Mirza Kuchik, who commanded the Jangalis for six years prior to the Soviet arrival, reflected a decidedly Iranian tradition of political protest. Born to a middle-class family in Gilan, Mirza Kuchik received a clerical education in the provincial capital of Rasht before joining the constitutionalist forces in 1908–09.²⁹ As attested by his contemporaries and reflected in the Jangali program, he promoted a

24. The importance of pan-Islamism in the Jangali platform is questioned in Pezhmann Dailami, “The Populists of Rasht: Pan-Islamism and the Role of the Central Powers,” in Touraj Atabaki, ed., *Iran and the First World War: Battleground of the Great Powers* (London, 2006), 137–62.

25. AVPRF, f. 04, op. 18, p. 115, d. 50750, l. 11 (Early RSFSR diplomacy in Iran).

26. AVPRF, f. 044, op. 18, p. 112, d. 50689, l. 1 (Notes from the RSFSR to the Iranian government); on the 1907 agreement, which divided Iran into two spheres of influence, see Jennifer Siegel, *Endgame: Britain, Russia and the Final Struggle for Central Asia* (London, 2002).

27. AVPRF, f. 04, op. 18, p. 109, d. 50639, l. 10 (Lev Trotskii to the Iranian envoy in Petrograd).

28. See Touraj Atabaki and Denis V. Volkov, “Flying Away from the Bolshevik Winter: Soviet Refugees across the Southern Borders (1917–30),” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 34, no. 2 (June 2021): 1900–22; on the British and Bolsheviks in the Iranian north, see Saul Kelly, “How Far West?: Lord Curzon’s Transcaucasian (Mis)Adventure and the Defence of British India, 1918–23,” *The International History Review* 35, no. 2 (2013), 274–93; Denis Volkov, “In the Global Crossfire: Russia, Britain, and the Caspian (1916–1919)” in Abbas Amanat, Kevin Gledhill, and Kayhan Nejad, eds., *The Caspian World: Connections and Contentions at a Modern Eurasian Crossroads* (Ithaca, forthcoming).

29. Fakhra’i, *Sardār-i Jangal*, 35.

social democratic conception of revolution rooted in the tradition of the lower-ranking pro-reform Iranian clergy.³⁰ During the late-constitutional period, however, Mirza Kuchik also fought alongside Caucasian socialists, marking the first chapter in a political lifetime of engagement with non-Iranian revolutionaries.³¹ These experiences, as well as Mirza Kuchik's preference for coalition-building over armed confrontation, drew socialist volunteers to Gilan even prior to 1920–21.³²

Ihsan-Allah Khan, the most uncompromising of the Jangalis after the establishment of the SSRI, emerged as both a personal and political foil to Mirza Kuchik. Born in the northern province of Mazandaran, Ihsan-Allah adopted revolutionary leanings as a student before joining the constitutionalist ranks and participating in the recapture of Tehran in 1909.³³ Over the years, he came to espouse a particularly radical brand of politics, as typified by his leadership of the Committee of Punishment (*Kumītih-i Mujāzāt*) and its assassination of pro-monarchical and pro-Entente public figures during World War I.³⁴ Ihsan-Allah's leadership of the Committee of Punishment was emblematic of a broader alignment of Iranian revolutionaries with the Central Powers against the Entente.³⁵ A number of these revolutionaries made their way into the ranks of the Gilan communists, including Haydar Khan 'Amo-Oghli (d. 1921), who eventually surpassed Ihsan-Allah as the most important leader in the SSRI. Amidst constitutionalist infighting, Haydar Khan established his radical credentials by assassinating the opportunistically pro-reform cleric, 'Abd-Allāh Bihbahānī, in 1910.³⁶ This assassination marked Haydar Khan's disdain for moderate elements within the movements he sought to coopt, a tendency that was first evident upon his arrival from the South Caucasus to the northeastern Iranian province of Khorasan in 1901.³⁷

The Caucasian backers of the SSRI endorsed Ihsan-Allah's efforts to expand the geographical boundaries of the revolution, driving the project away from the politics of compromise favored by Mirza Kuchik. Sergo Ordzhonikidze

30. Ḥusayn Farnīyā, *Man va Āzādī: Khāṭirāt-i Mīrzā Ḥusayn Khayyāt (Farnīyā)*, Mahdī Nūr Muḥammadī, ed. (Tehran, 2009), 121–22.

31. Chaquèri, *Soviet Socialist Republic*, 50–51.

32. Mirza Kuchik expressed his aversion to violence in proclamations circulated after the communist coup. See Grīgur Yaḩīkīyān, *Shuwravī va Junbish-i Jangal: Yāddāshthā-i yīk Shāhid-i 'Aynī*, Burzūyih Dihgān, ed. (Tehran, 1984), 155; Šādiq Kūchakpūr recounts that he organized operations against the communists over Mirza Kuchik's objections. See Šādiq Kūchakpūr, *Nihzat-i Jangal va Awzā'-i Farhangī-i Ijtimā'i-i Gilān va Qazvin: Khāṭirāt-i Šādiq-i Kūchakpūr*, Sayyid Muḥammad Taḩī Mīr Abū Al-Qāsemī, ed. (Rasht, 1990/1991), 48–50.

33. Ihsan-Allah recounts his early participation in the Jangal movement in his memoirs. See R. Abikh, "Natsional'noe i revoliutsionnoe dvizhenie v Persii v 1917–1919 gg. (Vospominaniia Ėskhan Ully-Xana)," *Novyi Vostok* 23–24 (1929): 234–67.

34. On the Committee of Punishment, see Javād Tabrīzī, *Asrār-i Tārīkhī-i Kumītih-i Mojāzāt* (Tehran, 1983).

35. Chaquèri, *Soviet Socialist Republic*, 461.

36. Alireza Sheikholeslami, "Ḥaydar Khan 'Amu-Oḩli," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, last modified March 20, 2012, at <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/haydar-khan-amu-ogli> (accessed June 14, 2023).

37. Alireza Sheikholeslami and Dunning Wilson, "The Memoirs of Haydar Khān Amū Oḩlū," *Iranian Studies* 6, no. 1 (Winter 1973): 25–51.

(d. 1937), who called for an explicitly socialist revolution in Iran both during and after the defeat of the SSRI, played a critical role in rallying Kavbiuro support for the Gilan front.³⁸ Long before assuming his responsibilities for the development of Soviet heavy industry (1932–37), Ordzhonikidze had burnished his revolutionary credentials among Iranian laborers, first in the Baku oilfields during the Revolution of 1905, and later during the recapture of Tehran.³⁹ After Ordzhonikidze, the Ukrainian revolutionary Nikolai Gikalo (d. 1938) arguably played the second-most important role in radicalizing the Iranian front. After serving as a Red Army officer in the North Caucasus during the Russian Civil War, Gikalo assumed formal control of the Iranian Red Army.⁴⁰ Created under the auspices of multiple competing revolutionary bodies in the Russian south, the Iranian Red Army made only a limited impact on developments in Gilan after its deployment in January of 1921, but provided Gikalo with another lever of influence over provincial politics.⁴¹

The formation of the SSRI appears from archival records to have been an improvised, almost accidental affair. As attested by Mirza Kuchik himself, the Jangalis had made overtures to the Soviets after their occupation of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic in April of 1920, but only to procure arms rather than form a united front.⁴² The Jangalis and Soviets began cooperation toward a joint government after the landing at Anzali, albeit without the assertion of a revolutionist line from Moscow.⁴³ While the SSRI evolved with fewer central directives than its Russian counterpart, the Soviets evidently calculated that they had stumbled upon a politically viable project. As such, Ordzhonikidze and Fedor Fedorovich Raskol'nikov (d. 1939), commander of the Volga-Caspian Military Flotilla, agreed to form a government with Mirza Kuchik on June 4, 1920, five days before the establishment of the Revolutionary-Military Committee.⁴⁴

While Mirza Kuchik sought to forestall their military operations, the communists harbored designs on Tehran from the earliest days of the landing at Anzali, deepening their operational splits with the Jangalis.⁴⁵ Beyond tactical disagreements, these splits also reflected political and programmatic differences. After the Jangalis forcibly disarmed some of the disembarked sailors,

38. On Ordzhonikidze's support for Iranian socialization, see Kayhan Nejad, "To Break the Feudal Bonds: The Soviets, Reza Khan, and the Iranian Left, 1921–25," *Middle Eastern Studies* 57, no. 5 (2021): 758–76.

39. On Ordzhonikidze, see Oleg Khlevniuk, *In Stalin's Shadow: The Career of "Sergo" Ordzhonikidze*, ed. Donald Raleigh, trans. David Nordlander (Armonk, NY, 1995).

40. On Gikalo, see O. M. Morozova, "Nikolai Fedorovich Gikalo," *Voprosy istorii*, no. 9 (2011): 37–57.

41. On The Iranian Red Army and Gikalo's leadership, see Genis, "Persidskaia Krasnaia Armiia," in *Krasnaia Persiia*, 157–71; Oliver Bast, "The Council for International Propaganda and the Establishment of the Iranian Communist Party," in Touraj Atabaki, ed., *Iran and the First World War* (London 2006), 163–80, 175–76.

42. *Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii* (hereafter RGASPI), f. 558, op. 1, d. 5643, l. 6 (People's Commissariat on Nationalities—materials on Iran).

43. On Karakhan's reluctance to commit fully to the Sovietization of Gilan, see Volkov, *Russia's Turn to Persia*, 115.

44. AVPRF, f. 04, op. 18, p. 110, d. 50663, l. 30.

45. Kūchakpūr, *Nihzat-i Jangal*, 38.

an anonymous Soviet commander recorded that “Mirza Kuchik himself is nothing other than a bourgeois Democrat, and his primary aims are to expel all Europeans and take power into his own hands, and thus he is not to be called a revolutionary.”⁴⁶ In the weeks following the landing, other Soviet commanders expressed similar sentiments, raising fundamental questions on the viability of their alliance with the Jangalis, as well as their understandings of the Jangali program.⁴⁷ Indeed, if Mirza Kuchik failed to satisfy the Soviets’ criteria for a “revolutionary” leader, how could he be entrusted with joint control over the SSRI? Acknowledging this dilemma, prominent Soviets such as Polikarp “Budū” Mdivani (d. 1937), who served as one of the earliest representatives to Mirza Kuchik, began calling for the ouster of the Jangalis from the SSRI.⁴⁸

During the summer of 1920, the communists consolidated political control in parts of Gilan and some areas of Mazandaran. Governance, however, proved to be more difficult, as they alienated local residents through policies of requisition, and more spectacularly, their possible burning of the Rasht bazaar on August 5, 1920.⁴⁹ As affirmed in the records of local Iranian authorities, the communists went door-to-door, confiscating valuables and household goods to fund their operations, consigning some to financial ruin.⁵⁰ They also implemented a number of anti-religious policies, curbing the power of the local clergy and destroying both mosques and churches.⁵¹ Such actions alienated much of the population of Gilan, spurring the movement of refugees south to the province of Qazvin.⁵² They also marked a new nadir in the communists’ relations with the Jangalis, who were increasingly relegated to observers rather than participants in the SSRI government. In this role, some Jangalis drew parallels between communist practices and pre-revolutionary Russian colonialism, evidencing the depth of their opposition to the socialist project.⁵³

46. RGASPI, f. 85, op. SP, d. 77, l. 1 (Report of the Special Expeditionary Corpus); on the disarmament, see Chaquèri, *Soviet Socialist Republic*, 233.

47. See, for example, B.L. Abukov to N.N. Krestinskii (June 30, 1920), in M.A. Persits, *Persidskii front mirovoi revoliutsii: Dokumenty o sovetskom vtorzhenii v Gilian (1920–1921)* (Moscow, 2009), 92.

48. Report of B. Mdivani (July 20, 1920), in Persits, *Persidskii front*, 118; on Mdivani’s role in northern Iran, see Genis, *Krasnaia Persiia*, 146–47.

49. On the Rasht bazaar, see Chaquèri, *Soviet Socialist Republic*, 252.

50. For accounts of the requisition of merchants’ wares, see Sāzmān-i Asnād va Kitāb-Khānih-i Milli-i Īrān (The National Library and Archives of Iran, hereafter SAKMI), 296/12349, and SAKMI, 240/1492; see SAKMI, 293/1688 for a record of the Police Administration of Qazvin (July 8, 1920) on the communists’ requisitions of peasants’ monies and lands.

51. These operations are recounted in University of Oxford, St. Antony’s College, Middle East Centre Archive (MECA), Edmonds 6–4, A.P.O. Menjcol (C.J. Edmonds) to Headquarters, Menjcol (November 6, 1920; November 28, 1920).

52. SAKMI, 360/7728 (Report to the Iranian foreign minister); see also the records of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic Mission in Iran in GARF, f. r4738, op. 2, d. 201, ll. 162–63.

53. Fakhrā’i, *Sardār-i Jangal*, 233–35; Kūchakpūr, *Nihzat-i Jangal*, 50; see also the account of the Socialist Revolutionary Viktor Shklovskii, who drew similar parallels when

Initially, the communists prioritized the expansion of their movement rather than the repair of relations with the northern Iranian population or the redress of internal dissension within their ranks. By late June of 1920, some two thousand communists had arrived in the Mazandarani capital of Astarabad, briefly forcing the evacuation of government forces and capturing critical infrastructure such as telegraph houses.⁵⁴ In the SSRI's early stages, Ihsan-Allah's aggressive advances reflected his confidence in the diplomatic backing of the AzSSR and possibly also the RSFSR, as some Soviet leaders saw broad geopolitical significance in the northern Iranian front. As demonstrated by Denis V. Volkov, the foreign minister Georgii Chicherin (1918–30) was an early advocate of Iranian Sovietization, a strategy he communicated to Lenin and Soviet diplomatic representatives in Iran.⁵⁵ In an internal circular from July of 1920, Chicherin, or some other elements within the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs (*Narodnyi komissariat inostrannykh del*, NKID), outlined Soviet anti-colonial ambitions in Asia, which were predicated on the premise that "Iran may offer an unparalleled opportunity for the liberation of and [fostering of] social movements throughout the East."⁵⁶ Via Baluchistan and Bushihr, the NKID envisioned the advance on Iran as the precursor to the liberation of Bombay and the ultimate expulsion of the British from the Indian subcontinent. From Iranian territory, the NKID also planned to disseminate agitators to Baghdad, Basra, Karbala, and Najaf for the future liberation of Mesopotamia.⁵⁷

Rather than a political consensus, the NKID's strategy reflected the designs of a particularly ambitious minority within early Soviet leadership. Evidencing a broader turn away from eastern revolution, Vladimir Lenin formulated a critique of pan-Islamism in advance of the Second Congress of the Comintern (July 19–August 7, 1920), driving an ideological and strategic wedge between the Russian Communist Party and socialists across Asia.⁵⁸ Less than one month later, at the Congress of the Peoples of the East (September 1–7, 1920), Grigorii Zinov'ev (d. 1936) denounced the Central Powers' instrumentalization of Islamic and pan-Islamic movements.⁵⁹ While Lenin and Zinov'ev were primarily concerned with developments in Anatolia, southeast Asia, and

recounting his military service in northern Iran in 1919. Viktor Shklovskii, *Sentimental'noe puteshestvie, vospominaniia, 1917–1922* (Berlin, 1923), 110.

54. GARF, f. r4738, op. 1, d. 50, l. 4 (Letter from Andrew Wickham to the Russian charge d'affaires); SAKMI, 360/8959 (Report from Mushār al-Salṭānih [July 7, 1920]); GARF, f. r4723, op. 1, d. 11 (Report to the commander of the Tabriz [Cossack] Brigade).

55. Denis Volkov, *Russia's Turn to Persia*, 128.

56. AVPRF, f. 04, op. 18, p. 109, d. 50645, l. 54 (Report on revolutionary prospects in Iran).

57. *Ibid.*

58. See the proceedings and associated documents in John Riddell, ed., *To See the Dawn: Baku, 1920-First Congress of the Peoples of the East* (London, 1993); critiques of pan-Islamism are recorded in Vladimir Lenin, "Tezisakh po Natsional'nomu i Kolonial'nomu Voprosam," in *Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii* vol. 31 (Moscow, 1965) 144–51; and Vladimir Lenin, "[Remarks at the] Second Congress of the Communist International" (July–August, 1920), in *Collected Works*, 45 vol. (Moscow, 1965), 31:213–63.

59. Harper, *Underground Asia*, 399; on the Congress, see Stephen White, "Communism and the East: The Baku Congress, 1920," *Slavic Review* 33, no. 3 (September 1974): 492–514.

the southern peripheries of the former Russian empire, the disjuncture in Iran was evident, as the Jangalis had fought under the banner of pan-Islamism only two years prior.⁶⁰ Soviet criticisms thus raised a pressing question: how could the Jangalis, having espoused pan-Islamic ideology for years, now openly align with secularizers and internationalists?

In Baku, the delegates' apparently poor understanding of Bolshevism and enthusiasm for "reactionary" manifestations of pan-Islamism highlighted the difficulties of directing regional anti-colonial movements toward socialism.⁶¹ Soviet officials who observed developments in Gilan, however, had already adapted their political designs accordingly. From the outset of the SSRI project, the NKID relayed the need for centrally coordinated agitation to realize its broader revolutionary designs in west and south Asia.⁶² In Gilan, this task fell to the Communist Party of Iran (CPI, *Edālat*), which emerged as a critical power broker in the SSRI until the project's collapse.⁶³ The Soviet incursion allowed for the CPI to hold its founding congress in Anzali on June 22, 1920.⁶⁴ Only weeks later, on July 10, the CPI leadership drafted a resolution on preparations to oust Mirza Kuchik from the SSRI, eventually enacting their plan on July 31.⁶⁵ In its wake, some Jangalis returned to the same forest hideouts they had occupied before the February Revolution, repositioning them—after a brief stint as administrators—as rebels once more.⁶⁶

Communist Governance in Gilan

The Coup of July 1920 provided the communists an opportunity to implement their revolutionary project in Gilan. While removing the Jangalis from the SSRI leadership, however, the coup failed to force their ouster from provincial political affairs, or to sever their ties with the agrarian population of Gilan. Rather, the Jangali-communist rivalry reflected the irreconcilability of their programmatic divides: While the Jangalis had adapted their revolution to local conditions, the communists expected local conditions to adapt to their revolution. Evidently, they had not, allowing the Jangalis to claim a popular anti-communist mandate and launch a series of operations against the SSRI government. In a moment of revolutionary promise, provincial infighting thus

60. On southeast Asia, see Lin Hongxuan, "Sickle as Crescent: Islam and Communism in the Netherlands East Indies, 1915–1927," *Studia Islamika* vol. 25, no. 2 (2018), 309–50; on Muslim "National Communism" in Russian Central Asia, see Vanja Hamzić, "Mir-Said Sultan-Galiev and the Idea of Muslim Marxism: Empire, Third World(s) and Praxis," *Third World Quarterly* 37, no. 11 (2016): 2047–60.

61. See Alp Yenen "The Other Jihad: Enver Pasha, Bolsheviks, and Politics of Anticolonial Muslim Nationalism During the Baku Congress 1920," in T.G. Fraser, ed., *The First World War and its Aftermath: The Shaping of the Modern Middle East* (Chicago, 2015), 273–93.

62. AVPRF, f. 04, op. 18, p. 109, d. 50645, l. 54.

63. On the leadership and political orientation of the early CPI, see Chaquèri, *Soviet Socialist Republic*, 216–19.

64. AVPRF, f. 04, op. 18, p. 110, d. 50663, l. 30.

65. *Ibid.*; on the coup, see Chaquèri, *Soviet Socialist Republic*, 236–37.

66. AVPRF, f. 04, op. 18, p. 110, d. 50661, l. 37 (On providing famine relief to Russia).

monopolized both factions' energies, and the communists' expansionist project degraded into one of consolidation.

In proclamations published after the coup, Mirza Kuchik claimed that the culturally alien representatives of the CPI had no mandate in Gilan.⁶⁷ Despite his antagonism to the local communists, however, Mirza Kuchik recognized the importance of retaining Soviet military support.⁶⁸ As such, he employed his proclamations to attack the SSRI leadership without impugning the “principle” (*maslak*) of communism itself:

Who are these communists, and what are they saying? Who is their leader? The communists who are now in Rasht are a band of Caucasian mercenaries (*qurchi*) and murderers, some of whom purport to be Iranian. They are unaware of, or even far from and opposed to, all the habits and attitudes and sayings of humanity. . . . In the Caucasus, they were engaged in the accumulation of wealth and contract-killing, Now, in order to plunder more wealth and kill more people more easily, they claim to espouse the principles of communism.⁶⁹

While evidencing some political sophistication, Mirza Kuchik's distancing of communist principles from communist actors raises questions on the Jangalis' knowledge of developments in the former Russian empire. Were they aware of the Bolsheviks' steady elimination of competing strains of socialism and social democracy? If unwilling to cede ideological ground even to Mensheviks, Socialist Revolutionaries, and Anarchists, why should the Bolsheviks have cooperated with programmatically distant Iranian revolutionary movements?

By interpreting a series of correspondences between Jangali and communist leadership, it is possible to reconstruct their negotiations between July 1920 and May 1921. In this period of disunity, the Jangali and communist factions continued their military operations while also seeking opportunities to bridge competing projects of governance. These efforts began in earnest on February 9, 1921, when the Central Revolutionary Committee of the SSRI (*Revkom*) under Ihsan-Allah and the eventual turncoat Khalū Qurban (d. 1922) delivered a conciliatory letter to Mirza Kuchik, proposing tempered goals that reflected pre-1920 *raison d'être* of the Jangal movement. These included the expulsion of foreign soldiers, the overthrow of the Qajar Dynasty (1794–1925), and the provision of aid to the Iranian people.⁷⁰ The deterioration in the Jangali-communist relationship was evident in Mirza Kuchik's reply of February 14, 1921. While proposing a conditional truce, Mirza Kuchik maintained that the revolutionaries must make strategic adjustments in light of the “complete ignorance of the behavior of the Soviet government in relation to us, to you, and all of the Iranian revolutionaries.”⁷¹ As he relayed repeatedly over the following months, Mirza Kuchik's impugning of Soviet

67. Yaḩikīyān, *Shuwraḩī va Junbish-i Jangal*, 154–56.

68. See, for example, Mirza Kuchik Khan to Lenin (July 17, 1920), in Persits, *Persidskiĭ front*, 111.

69. Yaḩikīyān, *Shuwraḩī va Junbish-i Jangal*, 156–57.

70. AVPRF, f. 04, op. 18, p. 110, d. 50661, l. 32 (Correspondences of Ihsan-Allah's government with Kuchik Khan).

71. AVPRF, f. 04, op. 18, p. 110, d. 50661, l. 33 (Kuchik Khan's reply to the Iranian Revkom).

“ignorance” reflected his belief that the AzSSR was encouraging policies that had alienated the revolution’s potential supporters across Iran.⁷² This included even the CPI leadership outside of Gilan, including Āvītīs Sulṭān-Zādih (d. 1938) and Kāmṛān Āqā-Zādih (d. 1939). By December of 1920, both figures had denounced the political course of the SSRI, and expressed their belief in gradualist and contingent theories of revolution, albeit under pressure from Moscow.⁷³

As the Jangalis and communists continued their strategic and programmatic debates, developments in Tehran portended the resurgence of the Iranian political center. On February 21, 1921, the journalist and diplomat Sayyid Žīyā’ al-Dīn Ṭabāṭabā’ī (d. 1969) and the Colonel Reza Khan launched a coup, positioning the latter to ascend to the Ministry of War and, eventually, to secure the throne of the deposed Qajars as Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1925–41).⁷⁴ Even this turn of government, however, did not interrupt the NKID’s normalization of diplomatic ties, as codified in the signing of the Irano-Soviet Treaty of Friendship on February 26, 1921.⁷⁵ This treaty marked a breakthrough in Iranian-Soviet relations after months of frustrated negotiations, during which representatives of the Iranian Foreign Ministry noted, but could not stop, the AzSSR-backed communists’ expansion across the Iranian north.⁷⁶ For his part, Reza Khan made use of the RSFSR’s promise of non-intervention to prepare campaigns against rebellious movements on the Iranian borderlands, including in Gilan, Mazandaran, and Iranian Azerbaijan.⁷⁷

The signing of the Treaty of Friendship indicated that powerful factions within the RSFSR recognized the legitimacy of the Tehran government, a development that underscored the importance of reconciliation for the revolutionaries in Gilan. In early March of 1921, Mirza Kuchik and the Jangali Revolutionary Council delivered a series of letters to the Central Committee of the CPI, emphasizing that they had always conducted their operations without resorting to mass requisitions and confiscations.⁷⁸ The Jangalis claimed that this posture, which they attributed to their “revolutionary experience in the East,” had secured the support of the agrarian population and enabled an

72. *Ibid.*

73. Chaquèri, *Soviet Socialist Republic*, 272–73; see “Āvītīs Sulṭān-Zādih on the Jangal movement,” in Cosroe Chaquèri, ed., *Asnād-i Tarikhī-i Junbish-i Kārgarī, Sowsīyāl-Dimukrāsī va Kumūnistī-i Īrān*, vol. 1 (Florence, 1974), 82; “The Speech of Kāmṛān Āqā-Zādih at the Third Congress of the Comintern,” in Cosroe Chaquèri, *Asnād-i Tarikhī-i Junbish-i Kārgarī, Sowsīyāl-Dimukrāsī va Kumūnistī-i Īrān*, vol. 3 (Tehran, 1981), 48.

74. See Homa Katouzian, “The 1921 Coup,” in *State and Society in Iran: The Eclipse of the Qajars and the Emergence of the Pahlavis* (London, 2000), 241–67.

75. On the signing of the treaty, see AVPRF, f. 04, op. 18, p. 110, d. 50663, l. 29; the treaty is (highly critically) assessed in Mikhail Volodarsky, “Soviet-Iranian Relations, 1917–21,” in *The Soviet Union and its Southern Neighbours*, 12–52.

76. SAKMI, 360/7708 (Report to the Iranian foreign minister [July 17, 1920]); SAKMI, 360/7728, 1–2 (1920, day and month illegible); AVPRF, f. 04, op. 18, p. 109, d. 50645, l. 5, 7.

77. On Reza Khan’s urban campaigns, see Stephanie Cronin, *Soldiers, Shahs and Subalterns in Iran: Opposition, Protest and Revolt 1921–1941* (New York, 2014); on his suppression of the tribes, see Stephanie Cronin, *Tribal Politics in Iran: Rural Conflict and the New State, 1921–1941* (London, 2010).

78. AVPRF, f. 04, op. 18, p. 110, d. 50661, l. 37 (Letter from the Jangali Revolutionary Council to the CPI Central Committee).

advance on Qazvin even in the face of British opposition.⁷⁹ The communists, they countered, had alienated any potential base of social or political support:

They [the communists] burned two-thirds of the best blocks in the city, and thus disheartened an increasing number of the proletariat and the artisans, each of whom possesses a small amount of capital, which they use to support a few family members. They violated a number of homes in the city and martyred a number of defenseless residents. . . . The homes of the peasants, after they had been subjected to all forms of violence were burned along with the fruits of their labor, and the peasants and their families fled and hid in the forest.⁸⁰

In his communiques with the Soviet leadership in the Caucasus, Mirza Kuchik reflected this same concern over the imposition of the communists' project. In an undated letter to Ordzhonikidze, Mirza Kuchik traced the breakdown in Jangali-communist relations to Ordzhonikidze's unfulfilled promises to oversee the "gradual implementation" of communism, and to refrain from intervention in Iranian affairs.⁸¹ According to Mirza Kuchik, enactment of the communists' program had undermined public support for the SSRI. "If you knew of the affront to the hearts of the Iranian people," Mirza Kuchik wrote, "you would come to believe that in such a situation, the support of the masses cannot be counted upon."⁸² Such appeals, however, did little to temper Ordzhonikidze's ambitions for Iranian revolution. In the Russian south, and later in his native Georgia, Ordzhonikidze displayed no disposition toward gradualism, and he made no indications of an adapted strategy in Gilan.⁸³

As Mirza Kuchik negotiated with Ordzhonikidze, the communists in Gilan, now reorganized into a "Central Committee for the Liberation of Iran" (*Tsentrāl'nyi komitet osvobodheniia Irana*, TsKOI) were strengthening their resolve against any form of compromise with the Iranian government.⁸⁴ On March 26, 1921, the TsKOI delivered a letter to Ordzhonikidze in Baku pleading for the retention of Red Army support, and openly expressing their intention to capture Tehran.⁸⁵ Their ambitions were boundless: upon taking Iran, the communists sought to liberate "the millions of slaves of the great [nation of] India, under the British yoke."⁸⁶ The communists in Gilan, however, were not the only faction clamoring for Soviet support, forcing Soviet leaders to determine who supported the regional anti-colonial project, and who simply saw in

79. Ibid.

80. Ibid.

81. RGASPI, f. 85, op. SP, d. 83, l. 26 (Letter from Mirza Kuchik to Ordzhonikidze).

82. Ibid.

83. Ordzhonikidze's hardline tendencies manifested in the Georgian Affair, a dispute over autonomy for the non-Russian Soviet republics. See Jeremy Smith, "The Georgian Affair of 1922: Policy Failure, Personality Clash or Power Struggle?" *Europe-Asia Studies* 50, no. 3 (1998): 519–44.

84. The CLI was a rebranding of Central Committee of the Red Revolution (*Tsentrāl'nyi komitet krasnoi revoliutsii*), albeit with a greater role reserved for alienated Jangalis. See Chaquèri, *Soviet Socialist Republic*, 338.

85. RGASPI, f. 85, op. SP, d. 83, l. 12 (Letter from the Central Committee for the Liberation of Iran to Ordzhonikidze).

86. Ibid.

the Soviets a counterweight to the government in Tehran. The latter category included, for example, the Mazandarani notable Ismā'īl Khan Amīr Mu'ayyid Savādkūhī, who formed a Revkom in Mazandaran sometime in the spring of 1921.⁸⁷ On April 3, 1921, the Chairman of the TsKOI wrote to Lenin, boasting that Mazandaran had “passed into the hands of the revolutionaries,” who were now positioned to oust the Shah and the British if only Moscow might provide military and financial aid.⁸⁸

The Mazandaran revolutionaries had made a critical miscalculation, making liberationist promises just as the RSFSR was suspending revolutionary designs in west and south Asia. The RSFSR, however, had limited abilities to direct political developments in Gilan, and its dictates scarcely curtailed independent revolutionary mobilization. In the spring of 1921, Chicherin fielded complaints from Iranian officials on the incursions of soldiers from the AzSSR, who violated Iranian territory even after some AzSSR officials had tempered their support for the SSRI project.⁸⁹ By March 17, 1921, Nariman Narimanov (d. 1925), soon to be appointed Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars of the AzSSR, and Mirza Davud Hüseyinov (d. 1938), Foreign Minister of the AzSSR, indicated their willingness to withdraw support for the SSRI as part of bilateral negotiations with the government in Tehran.⁹⁰ Given the shifting posture of Narimanov and Hüseyinov, AzSSR incursions may have reflected the initiative of local commanders rather than the government in Baku, adding another layer onto the complex and uncoordinated Soviet policy lines toward Iran.

As more Soviet leaders expressed their support for the normalization of relations with Iran, the NKID adjusted its diplomatic program accordingly. Initially, this task fell to Theodore Rothstein (d. 1953), who served as the first Soviet ambassador to Iran from 1921 to 1923 and partially directed the NKID's turn toward gradualism. Before assuming his ambassadorship, Rothstein's early career suggested genuine conviction and suitedness for diplomatic service in west Asia. Rothstein had spent much of his youth in England, an experience that underscored his opposition to British colonialism. He first expressed these sentiments in 1906–07, when working as a “London correspondent of a pro-Turk Egyptian paper,” before publishing a highly critical account of British rule in Egypt in 1910.⁹¹ Rothstein also wrote for the London-based *Daily News* in 1911–12, where he expressed his sympathies for the Young

87. RGASPI, f. 85, op. SP, d. 83, l. 33 (Translation of the letter of Sefula-Khan to the Iranian Revkom); *Krasnyi Iran*, April 5, 1921, no. 44, 1; on this *revkom*, see Genis, *Krasnaia Persiia*, 401.

88. RGASPI, f. 85, op. SP, d. 83, l. 19 (Letter from the CLI to Lenin).

89. On April 2, 1921, for example, Mubaşşir al-Mulk wrote to Chicherin, complaining that AzSSR soldiers had crossed the border into western Azerbaijan (AVPRF, f. 04, op. 18, p. 112, d. 50689, l. 5).

90. Narimanov and Hüseyinov to Ordzhonikidze (March 17, 1921), in Persits, *Persidskii front*, 374; on Narimanov, see Sara Brinegar, “The Oil Deal: Nariman Narimanov and the Sovietization of Azerbaijan,” *Slavic Review* 76, no. 2 (Summer 2017): 372–94.

91. See Theodore Rothstein, *Egypt's Ruin: A Financial and Administrative Record* (London, 1910); see also David Burke, “Theodore Rothstein, Russian Emigré and British Socialist,” *Immigrants & Minorities* 2, no. 3 (1983): 80–99.

Turks.⁹² In Iran, Rothstein reflected many of the same principles that had guided these early writings: a commitment to anti-colonialism and a belief in the necessity for economic and social development in Asia, albeit not yet on a socialist track.

After a 19-day journey from Ashgabat, Rothstein arrived in Tehran on April 25, 1921.⁹³ Initially, the central government in Tehran attempted to condition Rothstein's arrival on the liquidation of the SSRI, which he refused despite his personal hostility to the project.⁹⁴ Rather, even after Rothstein's arrival in Tehran and the seeming inevitability of Soviet withdrawal, the NKID sought to preserve all levers of influence in Iran. In planning their negotiations with the Iranian foreign ministry, Rothstein and the NKID attempted to condition the dissolution of the SSRI on a parallel British withdrawal, although Rothstein first intended to use the specter of Soviet troops to "terrorize" (*dliia terrorizirovaniia*) the new cabinet of Prime Minister Aḥmad Qavām al-Saltānih (d. 1955), at least for a few weeks.⁹⁵

In his correspondences, Rothstein argued against a long-term Soviet presence in Gilan, and rebuffed Ordzhonikidze's suggestion that he should establish ties with other potentially revolutionary groups. Foremost, Rothstein expressed no confidence in the CPI, impugning the Iranian communists for their factionalism and inability to work in extant representative institutions.⁹⁶ As he relayed to both Ordzhonikidze and Haydar Khan, Rothstein thus postponed the goal of Iranian revolution until the victory of its European counterpart, an increasingly remote prospect by 1921.⁹⁷ Before this time, he proposed the reorientation of Soviet policy in a narrowly anti-British direction:

The prospects for any sort of revolution in Iran, in my opinion, are absolutely hopeless and, in general, it is not befitting of us to engage in revolutionary activity in Iran, which is the cause of political and economic destruction. I view my task exclusively in terms of the struggle against the British, and when the time comes . . . I will say: "now your servant is released in peace," and I will request a transfer to more-civilized St. Petersburg and pack my suitcase. In the five months since my arrival here, I think I have achieved the better part of this task, and I think . . . that if we somehow succeed in annihilating British influence in Iran, both in the north and in the south, then in general there will be nothing left here for us to do, and we can then leave the Iranians to stew in their own juices, as we have done, for example, in our relations with the Abyssinians and the Polynesians.⁹⁸

Rothstein's belief in Iranian unpreparedness for socialist revolution reflected a growing consensus that extended even across competing factions, including the Jangalis, some Soviet leaders in the Caucasus, and

92. BNA, KV/2/1575_2/1 (October 19, 1918), "Undesirable Russians to Deport."

93. AVPRF, f. 04, op. 18, p. 110, d. 50663, l. 29.

94. *Ibid.*

95. AVPRF, f. 04, op. 18, p. 109, d. 50645, ll. 30–31 (Summary of issues of Russo-Iranian relations until 1921: liquidation of the Gilan front).

96. RGASPI, f. 85, op. SP, d. 94, l. 10 (Theodore Rothstein: ties with the people of Iran).

97. RGASPI, f. 85, op. SP, d. 94, l. 11 (Theodore Rothstein: "our task in Iran"); Rothstein to Haydar Khan (September 25, 1921), in Persits, *Persidskii front*, 425.

98. RGASPI, f. 85, op. SP, d. 94, ll. 10–11.

representatives of the NKID. Among them, however, Rothstein was uniquely single-minded in his opposition to the British, who had consolidated control over some Iranian political and military institutions since the collapse of tsarist Russian power in 1917.⁹⁹

In hopes of cultivating an anti-British alliance, Rothstein sought to foster ties across Iranian society, highlighting his relations with tribal populations, various government officials, trade unions, and the press.¹⁰⁰ Rothstein's initiatives, as well as the public indications of normalizing relations between the Iranian and Soviet Russian governments, marked a new phase in the existence of the SSRI. As if to signal an existential threat to the project, on April 4, 1921, a communist-controlled newspaper in Gilan, *Krasnyi Iran* (Red Iran), published a bulletin of less than forty words, informing its readers that the Iranian foreign minister 'Alī Qulī Khān Anṣārī Mushāvīr al-Mamālik (d. 1940) had publicly announced the signing of the Treaty of Friendship.¹⁰¹ And yet, neither the Jangalis nor communists had resigned themselves to developments in national capitals. Rather, in a final effort to rescue the revolutionary front, they attempted to reconcile the visions of competing factions.

The End of the Iranian Revolution

On May 6, 1921, Mirza Kuchik, Haydar Khan, Ihsan-Allah, Khalū Qurban, and another commander by the name of Mīrzā Muḥammādī signed an agreement of reconciliation, inaugurating a Unity Government to counter the growing threat of Reza Khan.¹⁰² In its failures to bridge the Jangalis' and communists' revolutionary projects, however, this final attempt at reconciliation once again collapsed along programmatic and strategic lines. After a brief rapprochement, each faction conditioned further cooperation on adoption of its respective political program. As its earliest tensions remained unresolved, ideas—as much as geopolitical interests—thus precipitated the SSRI's final collapse.

The Unity Government began with promise, as Gikalo and other Caucasian leaders lent their support despite Rothstein's turn toward the government in Tehran. In a telegram to Ordzhonikidze, Narimanov, and Hüseyinov (May 13, 1921), Gikalo argued that the Unity Government could win public backing and allow the revolutionaries to operate after the withdrawal of the Red Army.¹⁰³ Even with Gikalo's endorsement, however, internal contradictions continued to plague the Unity Government. In their reconciliation agreement, the revolutionaries signaled their expansionist ambitions by proposing to employ Gilan as a base of operations for future offensives.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, the revolutionaries recorded that they intended to strengthen their relations with the

99. See Volkov, "In the Global Crossfire."

100. RGASPI, f. 85, op. SP, d. 94, l. 10.

101. *Krasnyi Iran*, April 4, 1921, no. 43, p. 1.

102. The text of this Reconciliation Agreement is reproduced in Persits, *Persidskii front*, 384–85.

103. Gikalo to Ordzhonikidze, Narimanov, and Hüseyinov, (May 13, 1921), in Persits, *Persidskii front*, 385.

104. Reconciliation Agreement, in Persits, *Persidskii front*, 384.

Soviet republics, but that the coalition would not allow foreign intervention in Iranian affairs.¹⁰⁵

When forwarding assertions of its autonomy, the Unity Government repeated Mirza Kuchik's mistakes from May of 1920, failing to recognize the conditionality of Soviet material support. In practice, the Unity Government had only limited options to proscribe foreign intervention, as on the very day of its announcement, the Revolutionary Military Council of the RSFSR drafted a secret order on the evacuation of Anzali.¹⁰⁶ Within weeks, Gikalo also turned against the Unity Government, and against Haydar Khan's faction within the CPI more broadly. On June 23, 1921, Gikalo delivered a radiogram to Ordzhonikidze, echoing Ihsan-Allah's hostility toward Haydar Khan and claiming that he "and his ilk in the Central Committee of 'Edālat have clearly been taken by a nationalist mood and wish to isolate the revolutionary movement in Iran from our party."¹⁰⁷ Moreover, Gikalo relayed that Haydar Khan and his faction in the CPI did not have the ability, without the aid of the RSFSR, to lift Iran from the feudal stage of development and to channel the national-bourgeoisie movements toward a future socialist revolution.¹⁰⁸

When leveling criticisms against Haydar Khan, Gikalo's use of multi-stage language and theory did not indicate his adoption of the gradualist strategy. Rather, he claimed that only inter-factional unity might save the revolutionary project, a stance that scarcely comported with his own leanings toward the communists. While criticizing Mirza Kuchik's "liberal" tendencies and his resistance to revolutionary economic transformations, Gikalo maintained faith in Ihsan-Allah until the very end, describing him as an "absolute revolutionary, striving toward a fundamental break with the old and the construction of a new, most revolutionary form."¹⁰⁹ To preserve Ihsan-Allah's leadership in any united front, Gikalo proposed that the Soviets encourage further factional reconciliation, continue supporting Ihsan-Allah, and maintain relations with Mirza Kuchik while urging him to overthrow the Qajar monarchy. Red Army soldiers, Gikalo wrote, would be withdrawn regardless.¹¹⁰

Mirza Kuchik's anti-colonialism did not overcome his opposition to the communist project, and he expressed genuine vitriol toward its proponents in Gilan. In a letter to Rothstein, Mirza Kuchik described Ihsan-Allah as "a rotted member of the revolution, who attracts around himself all the schemers and evil persons." Ihsan-Allah, however, was not the only target of Mirza Kuchik's invective. "As long as the engine of the Eastern revolution is entrusted to the incompetent hands of Ordzhonikidze and his comrades," he continued, "rest assured that the egoism and idiotic tactics will continue."¹¹¹ These "idiotic tactics," as Mirza Kuchik termed them, included the communists' attempts to extend the revolution throughout the Iranian north despite its evaporating base

105. *Ibid.*

106. AVPRF, f. 04, op. 18, p. 110, d. 50663, l. 30.

107. RGASPI, f. 85, op. SP, d. 16, l. 3 (Radiogram from Gikalo to Ordzhonikidze).

108. *Ibid.*

109. *Ibid.*, l. 2.

110. *Ibid.*, l. 3.

111. RGASPI, f. 558, op. 1, d. 5643, ll. 30–31 (Chicherin—report on developments in Iran).

of political support in Gilan. As throughout the SSRI's existence, a small corps of hardliners drove these offensives. Nison Davidovich Khavin, RSFSR consul in Anzali, revealed that Gikalo had relayed the directives of Ordzhonikidze, pushing Ihsan-Allah to advance on Tehran even after Rothstein's arrival.¹¹²

Recognizing the existence of competing power centers in the Caucasus, Mirza Kuchik wrote to Iosif Stalin on July 10, 1921, confessing his frustration with other Soviet leaders and conceding that the Gilan revolution had no path forward without foreign support.¹¹³ At this late stage, thus, Mirza Kuchik expressed his belief that Stalin would provide aid, and implored him not to withdraw support for the Iranian revolution:

We must respect the customs and attitudes of the people, and we must count among our obligations the defense of religious practices. We must, in practice, prove to the people that we have no intentions other than [to secure] their political and economic independence. We must drive them step by step toward the correct path of the Great [October] Revolution. Finally, we shall transform the national movement into the world revolution.¹¹⁴

In his appeal, Mirza Kuchik sought to bridge competing revolutionary projects, claiming the mantle of gradualism from Rothstein, while still promising internationalization to appease the Caucasian maximalists. Stalin, however, showed no hesitation to retreat when strategically advantageous, and thus did not stop the proceeding withdrawal of the Red Army. By July 15, 1921, this withdrawal was effectively complete, excepting some fifty Red Army soldiers in Anzali who remained to protect the local fisheries.¹¹⁵

The Soviet Russian turn against the SSRI did little to temper the communists' ambitions throughout the Iranian north. In July of 1921, authorities in Mazandaran implemented martial law in advance of another offensive by Ihsan-Allah, which defeated a series of government counterattacks and secured some of the Caspian littoral.¹¹⁶ The embassy of the RSFSR characteristically condemned the incursions of these *avanturisty* (adventurers) and reaffirmed its commitment to Iranian sovereignty.¹¹⁷ By this point, even the leaders of the AzSSR had tempered their public association with the revolutionaries. On July 29, 1921, Narimanov circulated a notice that he had no relations with Ihsan-Allah.¹¹⁸ Gikalo also saw strategic benefit in the withdrawal of Soviet soldiers from Iran, stating that it would "underline our absolute non-interference in Iranian affairs."¹¹⁹ Critically, Lenin concurred with this

112. *Ibid.*, l. 43 (Khavin to Chicherin—report on developments in Iran); see the brief biography of Khavin in Genis, *Krasnaia Persiia*, 544–45, n. 17.

113. RGASPI, f. 558, op. 1, d. 5643, l. 4.

114. RGASPI, f. 558, op. 1, d. 5643, l. 5.

115. RGASPI, f. 85, op. SP, d. 17, l. 5 (Hüseynov to Chicherin and Boris Vasil'evich Legran); AVPRF, f. 04, op. 18, p. 109, d. 50645, l. 31.

116. AVPRF, f. 04, op. 18, p. 115, d. 50729, l. 18 (Attachment to the note of the Soviet plenipotentiary in Iran); RGASPI, f. 85, op. SP, d. 17, l. 5.

117. AVPRF, f. 04, op. 18, p. 115, d. 50729, l. 18.

118. AVPRF, f. 044, op. 18, p. 112, d. 50689, l. 3.

119. RGASPI, f. 85, op. SP, d. 16, l. 3.

new policy line, informing Rothstein in August of 1921 that he supported the practice of *ostorozhnaia politika* (measured politics) in Iran.¹²⁰

Lenin's cautious posture reflected a growing consensus among the RSFSR leadership that even if Iran had been prepared for socialist revolution, the Soviet political project was too precarious for export. The Soviet Republics emerged from the Russian Civil War in a ruinous state, their economies diminished and large swaths of the population facing starvation. As the Red Army neared victory, the Soviet press published progressively fewer articles on the march of socialism, and more on the elimination of hunger and illiteracy.¹²¹ In a testament to the dire Soviet straits, the Iranian government agreed in mid-1921 to provide some 325,000 kilograms of rice and 750,000 kilograms of wheat to alleviate famine.¹²² During the latter phases of the SSRI, the RSFSR and AzSSR even competed for the provision of food aid from Gilan, as fear of limited supply precluded the return of some of the communists from northern Iran to the Caucasus.¹²³

Late negotiations increasingly reflected RSFSR leaders' recognition of their political weakness and inability to project power into the Iranian north. In correspondence with the Politburo, Chicherin expressed his frustration that "the Caucasian comrades, strangely, do not wish to understand that the capture of Tehran at the present time will absolutely not mark the overthrow of despotism, as in 1908."¹²⁴ Indeed, the Iranian political landscape had evolved significantly since the constitutional period, when the Caucasian volunteers had realized their anti-monarchical ambitions without attempting socialist revolution or export. By 1921, Chicherin had observed both the unsuccessful implementation of socialism in the Iranian north and the retrenchment of British influence elsewhere in Iran. As such, he speculated that if the revolutionaries captured Tehran, the government would regroup in Isfahan and launch a counterattack with British support.¹²⁵

More than many other leaders, Stalin recognized the remoteness of revolutionary prospects in Iran.¹²⁶ In the final weeks of the SSRI, he wrote to Lenin and the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party, dolefully appraising developments in Iran and promoting the new gradualist line:

In Iran only a bourgeois revolution is possible, based on the middle classes with the precepts: the expulsion of the British from Iran; the formation of a united Iranian republican government, which is now scattered among

120. Lenin to Rothstein (August 13, 1921), in Persits, *Persidskii front*, 414.

121. Beyond the best-known early Soviet organs, these claims were repeated in regional newspapers such as *Sovetskii iug* and *Sovetskii Kavkaz*, held in the Rossiiskaia gosudarstvennaia biblioteka (Russian State Library), Newspapers and Theses Branch.

122. AVPRF, f. 04, op. 18, p. 110, d. 50663, l. 37.

123. Etienne Forestier-Peyrat, "Red Passage to Iran: The Baku Trade Fair and the Unmaking of the Azerbaijani Borderland, 1922–1930," *Ab Imperio*, no. 4 (2013): 79–112, especially 84; Brinegar, "Baku at All Costs," 155.

124. RGASPI, f. 558, op. 1, d. 5643, l. 31. While the constitutionalist military alliance was formed in 1908, it did not recapture Tehran until 1909.

125. RGASPI, f. 558, op. 1, d. 5643, l. 31–31a.

126. See also Stalin's dispatch to Chicherin (November 22, 1921) in RGASPI, f. 558, op. 2, d. 24.

various *khans* [elites] with numerous economic spheres; convention of a *majles* [parliament], established with general and fair elections; the formation of a national army, where above all Sovietists must be appointed; and an improvement of the situation of the peasantry at the expense of the khans. Pertinent instructions have been given to the Iranian communists.¹²⁷

Over the coming years, the CPI would begin to implement Stalin's suggestions, participating in electoral politics toward gradual rather than revolutionary change. In the short term, however, the partial reliance on the CPI posed strategic challenges. In autumn 1921, the CPI was fractured along lines of program as well as personality, as the party acknowledged in internal reports.¹²⁸ On September 2, 1921, Sulṭān-Zādiḥ complained to the Executive Committee of the Comintern that Baku was directing the Iranian left, fostering deluded hopes of capturing Tehran.¹²⁹ On October 1, 1921, the CPI thus released a resolution from its Second Congress, stating that Haydar Khan and Mirza Kuchik were "seriously harming the cause of social revolution in Iran," and that "the course of action of Haydar Khan is alien to the tactics of the communist."¹³⁰ In this moment of extraordinary factionalism, some unknown actors killed Haydar Khan on October 15, 1921.¹³¹

The assassination of Haydar Khan followed a number of setbacks, internal fractures, and military defeats that threatened the viability of not only the SSRI project, but indeed any prospect for revolution in Iran. In August and early September, Iranian government forces launched a series of counterattacks that secured most of Mazandaran.¹³² Resisting repatriation to Soviet territory, Ihsan-Allah attempted to rally support for the AzSSR until an opportune moment for another offensive.¹³³ Toward this end, on October 10, 1921, he delivered a desperate telegram to Ordzhonikidze, requesting the provision of two infantry and one cavalry brigade for an advance on Tehran.¹³⁴ Only this provision, Ihsan-Allah claimed, might "save the revolution." More ambitiously, Ihsan-Allah predicted that his forces might not only Sovietize Iran, but also spark revolutionary uprisings in India and Mesopotamia.¹³⁵

Ordzhonikidze shared Ihsan-Allah's aspirations, as did some representatives of the AzSSR, who were still conducting their policy independently of Rothstein.¹³⁶ Most of the Soviet leadership, however, rejected these late and

127. RGASPI, f. 558, op. 2, d. 9, ll. 1–2 (Telegram from Stalin to Lenin).

128. Azərbaycan Respublikası Dövlət Siyasi Partiyalar və İctimai Hərəkətlər Arxivi (State Archives of the Political Parties and Social Movements of the Azerbaijan Republic), reproduced at the Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis (International Institute of Social History) in Amsterdam, f. 7, op. 1, d. 4, k. (*korobka*) 59, ll. 188–89.

129. RGASPI, f. 495, op. 90, d. 57, l. 46 (Theodore Rothstein to Grigorii Zinov'ev).

130. "Resolution of the Second Congress of the CPI on Haydar Khan and Kuchik Khan," in Persits, *Persidskii front*, 427–28.

131. Chaquèri raises several theories on the killing of Haydar Khan in *Soviet Socialist Republic*, 356–59. He does not, however, note the release of this CPI proclamation on the eve of the killing.

132. Chaquèri, *Soviet Socialist Republic*, 347.

133. RGASPI, f. 558, op. 1, d. 5643, l. 54.

134. RGASPI, f. 85, op. SP, d. 16, l. 1.

135. *Ibid.*

136. RGASPI, f. 558, op. 1, d. 5643, l. 55.

lofty promises. After all, having failed to implement their revolution in Gilan, how could the Iranian communists have believably realized its internationalization? As relayed by Khavin, over the course of meetings in October, the representatives of the AzSSR instead came to support Rothstein's narrower efforts to secure Iran against British encroachment, which were to have laid the groundwork for a future revolution.¹³⁷ Even Ihsan-Allah purportedly informed Khavin that the CPI representatives in Gilan sought to use the revolutionary front for the interests of the AzSSR, but that "he considered their politics to be nationalistic and pan-Islamic, and he did not wish to be an instrument of their plans."¹³⁸ Rather, by October, Ihsan-Allah stated that he resolved to work only with Moscow toward the Iranian revolution, and now considered the politics of the AzSSR to be an impediment.¹³⁹

Ihsan-Allah's imputations, if faithfully relayed, misrepresented the AzSSR governance project. Rather than upholding pan-Islamism, Narimanov and the AzSSR leadership were conducting an incorporative campaign that, while affording some measure of cultural autonomy, was intended toward the union of the RSFSR and AzSSR.¹⁴⁰ Even so, without Soviet patronage from the Caucasus, Ihsan-Allah had few means to continue his insurgency. In early November, Soviet representatives compelled Ihsan-Allah and most of his remaining followers to leave Gilan for good.¹⁴¹ Recognizing the SSRI's pending defeat, Khalū Qurban took the initiative into his own hands, defecting to Reza Khan's faction and helping organize operations against Mirza Kuchik.¹⁴² With the explicit support of the British and even some representatives of the RSFSR, Reza Khan launched a final assault in Gilan, sequentially taking the cities of Rasht, Fūman, Kasmā, and Anzali by the end of October.¹⁴³

Without their former communist allies, the remnants of the Jangal movement collapsed. After several weeks of fighting, Mirza Kuchik fled toward the village of Khalkhāliyān, where he succumbed to the highland winter on December 2, 1921.¹⁴⁴ Despite a series of pretenders and minor rebellions that arose over the following years, Mirza Kuchik's death marked the effective defeat of the Gilan front. After years of mobilization against Baku industrialists, the tsar, and the British, the joint Iranian-Russian revolutionary struggle had come to an end.

In a moment of broad Soviet retreat, the collapse of the revolutionary project in Iran raised questions about the exportability of socialism to adjacent fronts in west and south Asia. From the first decade of the twentieth century, the Soviets had maintained a presence in the Iranian north, where they engaged in the same forms of agitation that had primed Russia for the October Revolution. Even in this political setting, one that could have been receptive

137. Ibid.

138. Ibid.

139. Ibid.

140. See Brinegar, "Narimanov."

141. Chaquèri, *Soviet Socialist Republic*, 360.

142. RGASPI, f. 558, op. 1, d. 5643, l. 34.

143. On these military defeats, see Partaw, *Gilān va Khīzish-i Jangal*, 371–74; on RSFSR support for Reza Khan, see Volkov, *Russia's Turn to Persia*, 127–28, 232.

144. Fakhrā'i, *Sardār-i Jangal*, 389–390.

to imported conceptions of socialism, the failed expansion of the Gilan front belied the precariousness of regional revolutionary designs at the provincial level. As the SSRI entered its final stages, the Soviet leadership weighed two choices: withdrawal or the imposition of a contested program on Iran. Within the bounds of the former Russian empire, the Soviets displayed little hesitation in subsuming unwilling populations into their political project. In Iran, they instead suspended their revolutionary ambitions and, belatedly, demonstrated their commitment to the sovereigntist principles outlined in 1917.

After the SSRI defeat, the Soviets did not attempt any comparable interventions in Iran, and in west and south Asia more broadly, until the end of World War II.¹⁴⁵ Like the normalization of diplomatic relations with the Turkish, Iranian, and Afghan governments, the withdrawal from Gilan instead reflected the Soviets' shift to a more deliberate strategy for regional revolution. As socialist construction faltered in Russia itself, the Soviets sought to provide west and south Asian revolutionaries theoretical and practical training to sustain anti-colonial networks without the forms of support lent to the Iranian left.¹⁴⁶ The early interwar period thus witnessed the adaptation of transnational revolutionary movements, including some that were liberationist but non-socialist, to various political settings across Asia.¹⁴⁷ While most of these movements would not realize their decolonizing ambitions for years to come, the Iranian case signaled the steep challenges that might—and eventually did—follow. When contending with oppositional revolutionary projects, the transition from national liberation to socialism would not be an inevitability, but rather a fraught and often failed process.

KAYHAN A. NEJAD is the Farzaneh Family Assistant Professor of Iranian Studies at the College of International Studies, the University of Oklahoma. His research focuses on historical linkages between west Asia and the Soviet and post-Soviet space.

145. In 1945–46, Soviet forces briefly upheld two autonomist governments in the Iranian northwest. See the recent reappraisal of this episode in Krista Goff, "Territory, War, and Nation-Building in the South Caucasus," in *Nested Nationalisms: Making and Unmaking Nations in the Soviet Caucasus* (Ithaca, 2020), 61–93.

146. On subsequent Comintern agitation and revolutionary mobilization in east, south, and southeast Asia, see Harper, "Rebels in Rubber Soles (1921–1922)" and "The Next World War (1922–1924)," in *Underground Asia*, 417–506.

147. For an introduction to recent directions in the study of interwar revolutionary mobilization, see the pertinent entries in Daniel Edmonds, Edmond Smith, and Oleska Drachewych, eds., *Transnational Communism and Anti-Colonialism*, special issue of *Twentieth Century Communism*, no. 18 (2020).