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Iran's Cycle of Control:

Cultural Encroachment, Revolutionary Upheaval, and the Unbroken Pattern of Domination

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Introduction

The 20th century in Iran was marked by intense interactions with foreign powers that went beyond politics and economics, extending deeply into the cultural sphere. Colonial and imperial powers, mainly Britain, Russia (and later the Soviet Union), and the United States, established numerous cultural institutions in Iran, including modern schools, missionary programs, language and cultural centers, libraries, and media outlets. Seemingly, these institutions aimed to educate, modernize, or strengthen ties, but they also became vehicles of cultural influence and even propaganda. Over time, many Iranians came to view them as instruments of a new kind of imperialism - a "cultural encroachment" upon Iranian society and values. This perception fed into growing anti-Western and anti-monarchical sentiments, as the Pahlavi monarchs (Reza Shah and his son Mohammad Reza Shah) were seen as complicit in allowing Western powers to penetrate Iran's cultural life. By the late 1970s, the resentment toward foreign cultural domination and the Iranian monarchy's Westernization policies had coalesced into a powerful narrative of resistance. These anti-imperialist and anti-monarchist narratives became a unifying force for the diverse groups that led the Iranian Revolution of 1979. This paper provides an in-depth analysis of how colonial cultural institutions operated in Iran and how they influenced Iranian perceptions and nationalist or religious discourse. It will examine British, Russian/Soviet, and American cultural initiatives in Iran during the 20th century, from missionary schools and churches to language institutes, radio broadcasts, libraries, and bi-national cultural centers, and trace Iranian reactions to these institutions. Translated Iranian primary sources (such as writings of intellectuals and clerics) and colonial documents are integrated to illustrate how "cultural imperialism" was debated and resisted. The key question is on how this cultural encroachment contributed to the anti-imperial, anti-monarchy narrative that

ultimately fueled the 1979 revolution. Furthermore, it explores how Iran, paradoxically, post revolution adopted similar authoritarian cultural practices, highlighting a full-circle phenomenon in cultural domination. Finally, the paper includes a comparative section that briefly explores similar cultural-imperial dynamics in Vietnam, showing that Iran's experience was part of a broader pattern in which foreign cultural influence provoked nationalist and anti-Western responses.

Soft Power as Cultural Influence

To analyze cultural encroachment, it is useful to begin with the concept of soft power. Political scientist Joseph S. Nye Jr. coined this term in 1990 to describe the ability of a country to shape the preferences or behavior of others through appeal and attraction rather than coercion or payment.[1] Soft power is transmitted culturally, through educational exchanges, media, and institutions that spread the language, art, or ideology of a nation. For example, popular entertainment (films, music), academic institutions and student exchanges, international broadcasting, and charitable or diplomatic initiatives all serve to attract others and co-opt them into one's sphere of influence. In the context of 20th-century Iran, foreign powers explicitly pursued soft power strategies. Schools, missionary societies, and cultural centers became conduits for influence, aiming to win Iranian hearts and minds by showcasing the benefits of the foreign power's culture and worldview.[2] Something that is important to consider is the efficacy of soft power depends on credibility and appeal. In cases where a foreign power was seen as hypocritical or its culture as alien, soft power could backfire and provoke a defensive reaction. If a nation advocates for democracy abroad while supporting authoritarian regimes, or preaches

[1] Nye, J. Soft power: the origins and political progress of a concept. *Palgrave Commun* 3, 17008 (2017). https://doi.org/10.1057/palcomms.2017.8

[2] Wainwright, Darius. 2019. "A 'Special Relationship?' American and British Soft Power in Iran, 1953-1960." https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/88757/1/22842667_Wainwright_thesis.pdf.

free trade while engaging in exploitative economic practices, its cultural overtures are likely to be met with cynicism and distrust.[3] Moreover, if the propagated foreign culture is perceived as fundamentally "alien," incompatible with, or actively threatening to cherished local customs, religious values, or societal norms, it is likely to provoke a defensive reaction. In societies with strong, ancient, and deeply rooted cultural identities, such as Iran, the uncritical influx of foreign cultural products can be interpreted as a form of cultural invasion, leading to a conscious effort to preserve and reassert indigenous traditions. Cultural products and institutions once viewed as benign or even desirable can become potent symbols of unwelcome foreign intrusion, becoming targets for resistance movements. This complex dynamic, where the initial attraction can morph into repulsion, is central to understanding the anti-imperial narratives that gained traction in Iran, ultimately contributing to the revolutionary fervor of 1979. The very efforts to engage and influence through culture, when perceived negatively or as a threat to national identity, can lay the groundwork for profound societal and political upheaval, demonstrating the double-edged nature of soft power.

Imperial Cultural Institutions in Iran: An Overview

Foreign powers' involvement in Iran during the 20th century often had a strong cultural component. Unlike classic colonial occupation, Iran was never fully colonized by a European power; however, it fell into the sphere of influence of multiple powers. This quasi-colonial status (especially during the late Qajar era and under the Pahlavi dynasty) allowed Britain, Russia, and later the United States to exercise considerable influence.[4] They obtained economic concessions and political leverage, but they also pursued "soft power" strategies to win Iranian hearts and

[3] Ibid 1

[4] Ghaderi, Farah. 2018. "Iran and Postcolonial Studies: Its Development and Current Status." *Interventions* 20 (4): 455–69. doi:10.1080/1369801X.2018.1487797.

minds or to project their own values and way of life.[5] Schools, missionary societies, and cultural centers became the conduits for such influence. The Iranian monarchy often initially welcomed or tolerated these as symbols of modernization and international friendship. Over time, however, many Iranians – from clerical leaders to secular nationalists – grew wary of these foreign institutions on Iranian soil. The early 20th century marked a pivotal era in Iran's struggle against imperialist domination, as foreign powers vied for control over its strategic and economic resources. Despite Iran's declared neutrality during World War I, it became a battleground for Russian, British, Turkish, and German forces, leading to widespread occupation and internal strife. This period saw the rise of democratic forces in Iran, notably the Democratic Party, which, seeking to counter Anglo-Russian influence, aligned with Imperial Germany. This alliance, however, provided Britain and Russia with a pretext to solidify their control, culminating in a secret 1915 agreement to divide Iran into spheres of influence and install a puppet government in Tehran.[6] The landscape shifted dramatically following the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, as Soviet Russia renounced Tsarist privileges in Iran and urged the Iranian people to resist British imperialism. This historical context underscores the long lasting impact of foreign intervention on Iran's political evolution and its persistent quest for sovereignty. Behind educational or cultural facades lay ulterior motives: the spread of Western ideology, the undermining of Iran’s Islamic traditions, or even espionage.[7]

From the early 1900s, Iran’s traditional educational system (based on maktabs and religious madrasas) encountered competition from Western-style schools. Some of these schools were missionary-founded – for example, American Presbyterian missionaries established schools

[5] Ibid
[6] Benab, Younes Parsa. 2025. “The origin and development of imperialist contention in Iran; 1884-1921.” https://www.iranchamber.com/history/articles/origin_development_imperialist_contention_iran2.php.
[7] Ibid ^2

in various cities, and French Lazarist missionaries ran schools in Tehran and elsewhere.[8] Meanwhile, Iranian reformers themselves founded new secular schools (often with European inspiration). These modern schools taught foreign languages and sciences instead of solely Islamic subjects, representing a dramatic cultural shift. The changes provoked a backlash from conservative segments. Clerical and traditional opponents often viewed the new schools – especially those tied to foreigners – as an alien intrusion. A key incident occurred in Tabriz at the turn of the century: the modern school founded by Hasan Roshdiyeh (an Iranian educator inspired by European methods) was attacked and destroyed by local conservatives, who accused the new schools and tutors of spreading anti-Islamic and anti-monarchical sentiments, an early manifestation of resistance to cultural change.[9] This example highlights two important points. First, Western-style education was immediately seen by some as corrosive to Iran's religion and royal authority, even though Roshdiyeh himself was working under Iranian auspices.[10] Second, violence and protest would be recurring tactics in opposing perceived cultural encroachment.

By the 1940s and 1950s, all three major foreign powers, The United Kingdom, the USSR, and the United States, had active cultural programs in Iran. Each power's approach reflected its geopolitical aims: Britain sought to maintain its waning influence post occupation by promoting English language and British culture, the Soviet Union, especially during wartime and the early Cold War, tried to appeal to leftist intellectuals and promote socialist ideals, and the United States, rising as a dominant influence after World War II, invested heavily in cultural diplomacy to win over Iran's public and elites in the contest against Soviet communism.[11] Iranians

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[8] Armajani, Y. n.d. "ALBORZ COLLEGE - Encyclopaedia Iranica." Encyclopædia Iranica. https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/alborz-college/.
[9] Zahirinejad, Mahnaz. "Education and Cultural Change in the Modernisation of Iran: The Role of Shiʿite Clerics and the Middle Class." *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* 75, no. 2 (2022): 119–134.
[10] Curzon, George N. 2019. *Persia and the Persian Question: Volume 2*. N.p.: hansebooks. [11] United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. n.d. IRAN DURING WORLD WAR II. https://www.ushmm.org/m/pdfs/Iran-During-World-War-II.pdf.

responded to these efforts in complex ways. Some urban Iranians embraced the opportunities – studying in foreign-language schools, attending cultural events, or consuming Western media – viewing them as gateways to modernity and progress. Others grew increasingly suspicious that Iran's own culture was being sidelined and that these foreign-run institutions were eroding Iranian independence. Crucially, by the 1960s and 1970s, a powerful narrative had emerged among dissidents that Iran's ruling regime was allowing a form of "cultural colonialism" to sap the country's identity and sovereignty. Writers like Jalal Al-e Ahmad coined the term "Gharbzadegi" (usually translated as "Westoxication") to describe the condition of a nation obsessed with and dominated by the West to the point of losing its own self.[12] Al-e Ahmad's influential 1962 book Gharbzadegi described this as a societal disease, the aggregate of events in the life and mode of thought of a people having no supporting tradition but having only what the machine of western influence brings them, a staunch critique of how uncritical importation of Western technology and culture had left Iran "infested" and without an authentic soul.[13] Such ideas resonated strongly in the intellectual climate of the late Pahlavi era, bridging secular and religious critiques of the Shah's regime.

Missionary Schools and Early Cultural Inroads

British missionary activity in Iran began in the 19th century, primarily driven by religious organizations such as the Church Missionary Society (CMS) and others.[14] While the missionaries' primary aim was evangelical (converting Iran's populace to Christianity), in

[12]Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, Eskandar. n.d. "Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi Gharbzadegi, Colonial Capitalism and the Racial State in Iran Contact email: E.Sadeghi@gold.ac.uk." Goldsmiths Research Online. https://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/29200/15/Sadeghi-Boroujerdi,%20E.%20(2020)%20Gharbzadegi%20Colonial%20Capitalism_AAM.pdf.
[13]Borges, M. S. (2023). Suffering for/against the nation: Gharbzadegi and the tensions of anticolonialism in Iran. Millennium, 52(1), 109-134. https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298231194740 (Original work published 2023)
[14]Keen, Rosemary. "Church Missionary Society Archive". Adam Matthew Publications. Retrieved 29 January 2017.

practice their more lasting impact was in education and healthcare. Missionaries established some of the first modern schools in Iran's interior. For example, Anglican missionaries set up schools in Isfahan and other cities, and British mission hospitals appeared in places like Yazd.[15] These schools taught reading, writing, math, and often English language, and were typically open to religious minorities (Armenians, Assyrian Christians, Jews) and sometimes Muslim students as well. Iranian attitudes toward these missionary schools were ambivalent. On one hand, educated elites and modernizers appreciated the knowledge imparted and often sent their children to such schools to learn Western science and languages. On the other hand, the clerical establishment and many ordinary citizens were deeply suspicious of missionaries. They feared (not without reason) that missionary schools could be a cover for religious conversion efforts and a means of extending Western (Christian) cultural influence. Iranian governments of the time had to carefully balance these sentiments. During the late Qajar period and into Reza Shah's rule, authorities placed restrictions on overt proselytizing in mission schools to avoid offending the Shiʿite clergy. In Tehran's American Presbyterian mission school (later known as the Community School), for instance, the school was allowed to function but the government would find it easier to appease the irate behavior in the Islamic establishment by restricting Christian religious activities at the school.[16] In other words, the school could teach general subjects, but overt Christian preaching to Muslim students was curtailed. This compromise allowed some cultural exchange but underscored that education remained a sensitive arena.

By the end of the Qajar dynasty in 1925, Iran had approximately 3,300 government schools with about 110,000 total students – in a country of perhaps 10–12 million people.[17]

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[15] Ibid

[16] "The rise and fall of Tehran's Community School." *Montreal Gazette*, September 24, 2006.

[17] Curtis, Glenn E, Eric J Hooglund, and Library Of Congress. Federal Research Division. Iran: A Country Study. Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress: For sale by the Supt. of Docs., U.S. G.P.O, 2008. Pdf. https://www.loc.gov/item/2008011784/.

Female education lagged especially far behind. In the 1922 school year only about 7,200 female students were enrolled, versus 35,000 males, reflecting deep societal resistance to girls' schooling in many areas.[18] Overall literacy in Iran remained extremely low well into the Pahlavi period; as late as 1950 only around 12–15% of the population was literate.[19] This backdrop of educational underdevelopment meant that foreign-run schools and cultural centers filled a void. When missionary schools taught modern science or when an Alliance Française library lent out novels, they were often providing services that the Iranian state or local institutions were not yet able to provide widely.[20] In the short term, many Iranian students and intellectuals welcomed these opportunities to learn English or French, to access world literature, or to acquire technical skills.

Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1925–1941) took a nationalist, centralizing approach that significantly changed the landscape of foreign cultural institutions. Determined to assert Iran's independence and implement his own state-led modernization, Reza Shah curtailed the activities of foreign missions. Many missionary schools and hospitals were taken over by the Iranian government.[21] Reza Shah's policy was essentially to nationalize education – folding mission schools into the state school system – and thereby eliminate foreign control over Iranian schooling. Notably, Tehran's prestigious Alborz College (originally an American Presbyterian college run by missionary Dr. Samuel M. Jordan) was taken over by the government; Dr. Jordan retired, and the school became fully Iranian-run (though it retained its high reputation and

[18] Iravani, Mohammad Reza (2011). "Women's Education, Employment and Unemployment in Iran". *J. Basic Appl. Sci. Res*. 1 (12): 2965–2970.
[19] Amar. n.d. Welcome to Statistical Centre of Iran. https://www.amar.org.ir/en/.
[20] Djavad Hadidi, "FRANCE xv. FRENCH SCHOOLS IN PERSIA," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, X/2, pp. 178-181, http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/france-xv
[21] Karimi, Linda Colleen. *Implications of American Missionary Presence in 19th and 20th Century Iran*. M.A. Thesis, Portland State University, 1975.

Western-style curriculum).[22] Similarly, missionary hospitals were turned into state hospitals. This marked the end of an era in which foreigners openly ran schools on Iranian soil. Iranian nationalists approved of these measures as bolstering sovereignty yet, paradoxically, Reza Shah himself was instituting a form of internal Westernization (adopting European models in dress codes, law, etc.), which would generate its own backlash from religious conservatives.[23]

The British Council in Iran (1942–1979)

Britain's cultural influence in Iran did not end with the missionaries. During World War II, the British re-established a formal cultural presence through the British Council, a government-sponsored organization for cultural diplomacy.[24] The first British Council representative arrived in Tehran in 1942, soon after the Anglo-Soviet occupation of Iran (which forced Reza Shah's abdication).[25] The timing was no coincidence: Britain wanted to win Iranian public support during the war and counteract any German influence. The British Council's top priority was English-language education.[26] By 1944, the Council's teaching centers in Iran had over 4,000 Iranian students enrolled in English classes.[27] This rapid expansion reflected the great demand among Iranians for learning English (particularly as the presence of Allied troops and the United States' emerging influence made English a valuable skill). By 1948, the British Council had opened six provincial institutes with libraries creating a network of cultural centers across the country.[28] These centers typically offered not only language instruction but also

[22] Ibid
[23] Chehabi HE. Staging the Emperor's New Clothes: Dress Codes and Nation-Building under Reza Shah. *Iranian Studies*. 2022;26(3-4):209-233. doi:10.1080/00210869308701800
[24] British Council. n.d. "Our history." https://www.britishcouncil.org/about-us/history.
[25] EIr, "BRITISH COUNCIL," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, IV/5, pp. 455-456, available online at http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/british-council-activities-in-iran-1942-79 (accessed on 30 December 2012).
[26] Ibid
[27] Ibid
[28] Ibid

reading rooms stocked with English books and periodicals, lecture series, and sometimes British film screenings or other cultural events. In essence, they were mini "British cultural embassies" aimed at fostering Anglophilia and friendly ties.

In 1952, as relations soured, the Council had to close several provincial centers for financial and political reasons, and eventually it withdrew entirely amid the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company dispute.[29] This withdrawal was short-lived. After the CIA-British-backed coup in August 1953 that removed Mossadegh and restored the Shah's full power, relations improved.[30] The British Council returned to Iran in 1955, resuming its activities under director Derek Traversi. By 1959, Britain and Iran even signed a cultural cooperation agreement to formalize and expand these exchanges.[31] Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, under the Shah's strongly pro-Western regime, the British Council grew to be one of the largest foreign cultural operations in Iran. By June 1978, just months before the revolution, the Council's Iran operation was among the top three in the world for the British Council in size, boasting offices in six cities and employing dozens of British teachers and staff alongside local employees.[32] This intensive cultural interaction certainly had a modernizing effect on segments of Iranian society (especially the urban middle class and technocratic elites who were comfortable with the English language and British cultural products).

One highlight of British cultural diplomacy was the grand British Cultural Festival of October 1977 in Iran. In that month, the British Council organized an unprecedented series of cultural events in Tehran and other cities, featuring the Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet, the Prospect

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[29] Ibid
[30] Backhouse, Fid. n.d. "1953 coup in Iran | Coup D'etat, Description & Facts." Britannica. https://www.britannica.com/event/1953-coup-in-Iran.
[31] EIr, "BRITISH COUNCIL," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, IV/5, pp. 455-456, available online at http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/british-council-activities-in-iran-1942-79 (accessed on 30 December 2012).
[32] Ibid

Theatre Company performing Shakespeare, classical music concerts by British orchestras playing alongside Iranian ensembles, exhibitions of British art, literature, and even a football match between Manchester United and an Iranian all-star team in the presence of the Crown Prince.[33] The festival was meant to celebrate and solidify the warm relations between the UK and Iran in the Shah's era. On a surface level, it was a great success, drawing enthusiastic responses from the Iranian public and garnering official praise. Yet, in hindsight, the 1977 festival might also be seen as an extravagant display of foreign culture at a time when many Iranians were increasingly discontented with the Shah's regime and its closeness to Western powers. It is telling that within a year, by late 1978, the British Council's flourishing enterprise came to a sudden halt due to the political turmoil. As massive anti-Shah demonstrations swept Iran in 1978, foreign cultural centers became targets of suspicion and anger. In December 1978, amid strikes and protests, the British Council began evacuating staff. By early 1979, after the Shah's overthrow, all British Council offices in Iran were closed and its operations terminated.[34] What had started as a mission to win Iranian hearts had ended with a forced exit, as revolutionary Iran no longer tolerated such foreign cultural outposts.

BBC Persian and British Media Influence

Another significant British cultural institution was the BBC Persian Service, a division of the BBC World Service that broadcast in Persian to Iran. Established during World War II (in 1940), BBC Persian initially served as a propaganda tool against Nazi influence and later became an important source of news for Iranian listeners. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, many educated Iranians tuned in to BBC broadcasts, which often provided more reliable or uncensored

[33] EIr, "BRITISH COUNCIL," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, IV/5, pp. 455-456, available online at http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/british-council-activities-in-iran-1942-79 (accessed on 30 December 2012).
[34] Ibid

news than local media. In 1941, for example, BBC Persian famously announced Reza Shah's forced abdication and thus informed many Iranians of the historic regime change. The British government and the BBC viewed it as a means to project British viewpoints and soft power.[35] However, the relationship was double-edged: at times the Shah's government complained that BBC Persian gave too much coverage to opposition figures (indeed in 1978 the Iranian authorities accused the BBC of fanning revolutionary flames by broadcasting interviews with dissidents).[36] From the opposition's side, there were also suspicions that the BBC was serving British interests and perhaps manipulating Iranian opinion. Ayatollah Khomeini himself, during the revolutionary period, noted how foreign media were portraying events and issued warnings about listening to imperialist media narratives. Nonetheless, it is widely acknowledged that BBC Persian had a notable impact on political consciousness in Iran, often inadvertently bolstering anti-regime narratives by reporting on government repression and public protests when domestic media were muzzled.

Iranian Perceptions and Reactions

In evaluating the British cultural role overall, one finds a mix of genuine educational/cultural exchange and Iranian nationalist suspicion. For much of the 20th century, Britain was seen as the classic "imperialist" meddler in Iran (owing to the history of controlling Iran's oil through the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company and earlier interventions).[37] Thus, even benign cultural programs carried the taint of imperialism in Iranian eyes. The British Council's English

35 Sreberny, Annabelle; Torfeh, Massoumeh (October 2008). "The BBC Persian Service 1941–1979" (PDF). *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*. **28** (4): 515–535. doi:10.1080/01439680802313088. S2CID 191338945. Retrieved 3 July 2019.

36 "Appendix 8 - Memorandum submitted by BBC World Service". Foreign Affairs - Second Report. *House of Commons - Foreign Affairs Committee* (Report). UK Parliament. January 2001. Retrieved 3 July 2019.

37 Chamlou, Nadereh. 2020. "Main content start Iran's 1933 Oil Concession – Myths and Realities." Stanford University. https://iranian-studies.stanford.edu/events/lecture-series/irans-1933-oil-concession-myths-and-realities.

classes were popular, but there was always an undercurrent of doubt: were they purely educational, or also aimed at shaping Iran's elite attitudes in Britain's favor? The presence of British libraries and staff in provincial cities led to rumors that these centers were spy stations or propaganda hubs. British Council staff sometimes did coordinate with the Foreign Office on public relations, blurring cultural work with political objectives. During the revolutionary mobilization of 1978, slogans on Tehran's streets and in sermons frequently targeted the "Old Fox" (a nickname for Britain) alongside the United States and the Shah. Protesters attacked symbols of Western presence and in some cities crowds reportedly vandalized offices of British or American institutions.[38] The Iranian narrative was shifting: any foreign cultural influence, no matter how educational on the surface, was now deemed part of the imperialist web sustaining the Shah. In sum, British cultural institutions left a legacy of educating many Iranians and facilitating cultural contact, but they also inadvertently fed the discourse of cultural imperialism that helped delegitimize the monarchy.

The Russian/Soviet Cultural Influence: From Tsarist Schools to Socialist Propaganda

Russia's involvement in Persian affairs dates back to the 19th century, when the Tsarist empire expanded southward and vied with Britain in the "Great Game" for influence. Russian influence was felt in northern provinces, and later the Soviet Union made deliberate efforts at cultural outreach, especially among leftist and ethnic minority groups.

Imperial Russia and Early 20th-Century Influence

[38]Pourparsa, Parham. 2015. "Why is Britain an 'old fox' in Iranian media rhetoric?" BBC. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34052821.

In the late Qajar era (especially after the 1907 Anglo-Russian Convention dividing Iran into spheres), northern Iran was considered Russia's zone. Russian military and commercial presence grew in cities like Tabriz, Rasht, and Anzali. Accompanying this, Russia established a few cultural footholds. The Russian Orthodox Church opened churches for expatriates and converts, often serving the children of Russian merchants or local Caucasian communities.[39] Unlike the British and, later, the Americans, who placed considerable emphasis on English-language education as a tool of cultural influence, Tsarist Russia did not widely promote the Russian language or establish a significant network of secular Russian schools in Iran. Several factors likely contributed to this disparity. The Cyrillic alphabet presented a more formidable barrier for Persian speakers than the Latin script used for English or French. Furthermore, Russian culture, despite its richness, may have held less allure for Iranian elites compared to the Western European cultures often associated with modernity, progress, and, ironically, anti-imperialist liberal ideas that some Iranians hoped to emulate.[40] Russia's primary focus in Iran remained overwhelmingly strategic and economic. Securing its southern frontier, countering British influence, and exploiting economic opportunities rather than a broader project of cultural assimilation or the cultivation of a Russophile Iranian elite through education.[41] Russian policy was more geared towards direct control and influence over the Qajar state and northern territories than winning "hearts and minds" through extensive cultural programs.

During and after Iran's Constitutional Revolution, Russia often acted to quash democratic or modernist movements (for example, Russian troops bombarded Iran's parliament in 1908 to

[39] Go Persis. n.d. "Cantor Church, A Russian Church in Iran." https://gopersis.com/cantor-church/.
[40] Alisa Shablovskaia. Russian Hubris in Iran: Diplomacy, Clientelism, and Intervention (1907-1912). Ab Imperio - Studies of New Imperial History and Nationalism in the Post-Soviet Space, 2019, 2019 (1), pp.79-103. halshs-02494345f
[41] Firdous, Neelofar. "ANGLO-RUSSIAN IMPERIALISM IN IRAN." *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 78 (2017): 864–68. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26906161.

aid the royalist coup).[42] Such actions gave Russia a harsh image. Culturally, therefore, Tsarist Russia did not win Iranian hearts but rather many Iranian citizens regarded Russia as an oppressor. This negative sentiment was important later when Soviet Russia tried cultural diplomacy, it had to overcome a legacy of suspicion.

Soviet Cultural Diplomacy (1940s–1970s)

In ideological terms, the Soviets sought to export communism and saw potential in Iran's impoverished masses. One vehicle for Soviet influence was the Iranian Tudeh Party, founded in 1941, which was a socialist/communist party with strong ties to Moscow.[43] The Tudeh Party's activities included not just politics but also cultural propagation, publishing Marxist literature in Persian, staging worker education programs, theater, and film showings with social themes.[44]

During World War II, when Allied (including Soviet) troops occupied Iran (1941–46), Soviet cultural influence reached a high point. The USSR actively promoted its worldview through. Soviet cultural delegations in Iran organized Persian-language publications praising socialism, hosted exhibitions, and supported local Iranian cultural organizations that were sympathetic to the USSR.[45] The Sovietys opened branches in various cities and worked in tandem with Soviet advisers to highlight socialist achievements. For example, they pointed to the modernization of Soviet Central Asia (in places like Azerbaijan SSR and Uzbekistan) as a

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42 Cronin, Stephanie (1997). *The Army and Creation of the Pahlavi State in Iran, 1921-1926*. I.B.Tauris. p. 61. ISBN 978-1860641053.

[43]H. RamHormozi, *Averting An Iranian Geopolitical Crisis: A Tale of Power Play for Dominance Between Colonial Powers, Tribal and Government Actors in the Pre and Post World War One Era* (Victoria, BC, Canada: Friesen Press, 2016), 274.

[44]Shahvar S. Hezb-e Tudeh-ye Iran and Its Struggle Against the Challenges Posed Against It by the British, 1942–1946: An Analysis Based on Soviet Documents. *Iranian Studies*. 2024;57(1):165-179. doi:10.1017/irn.2023.56

[45]Iran–America Society. *Iran–America Society (IAS) Records and Reports*, 1950s–1970s (as cited in Wainwright, James. "A 'Special Relationship?' American and British Soft Power in Iran, 1953–60." Ph.D. diss., University of Reading, 2019).

model, arguing that those regions shared cultural ties with Iran and were flourishing under socialism.[46] Such messaging was aimed at Iranian intellectuals disillusioned with Western imperialism suggesting that the Soviet Union was a more benevolent modernizer that even respected Persian culture.

In northern Iran, where Soviet forces remained after WWII, the Soviets went further by supporting autonomous local governments (the Azerbaijan People's Government and the Kurdish Republic of Mahabad in 1945-46). In these areas, the Soviet authorities helped establish local-language schools, theaters, and newspapers. For instance, in Tabriz (capital of Iranian Azerbaijan), for that brief period, education was offered in the Azerbaijani Turkic language (using the Latin alphabet, following Soviet practice) and socialist realist cultural troupes performed plays.[47] This was a clear attempt to transplant Soviet-style cultural policy into Iran. The legacy was lasting in that it convinced both the Iranian state and many ordinary Iranians that the Soviet Union was actively trying to reshape Iranian culture and politics in its image. To the Shah and Iranian conservatives, communism was as much a cultural threat as a political one. Communism was atheistic and internationalist, seen as hostile to Iran's Islamic traditions and national sovereignty.

Among the general public, Soviet or Russian culture never achieved the kind of soft-power appeal that American or British culture did. Few Iranians learned the Russian language or read Russian literature in the original language (not nearly on the scale of those learning English). The attraction of the West – pop culture, movies, glamor – overshadowed the rather ideological offerings of the Soviet camp. Nonetheless, leftist intellectuals found the

[46] Ibid
[47] Ibid

Soviet's ideology as attractive. For these intellectuals, disillusioned with the Shah and with Western capitalism, the Soviet Union (or more broadly the socialist world, including China and Cuba) represented an alternative path.[48] They translated the works of Marx, Lenin, and later Mao. They read Soviet journals and some even idealized the guerrilla movements and proletarian art coming from those countries.[49] However, The Soviet Union was somewhat peripheral in popular revolutionary rhetoric, in part because Khomeini's Islamic movement did not want to alienate a potential counterweight to America.[50] Khomeini's slogan was explicitly rejecting Soviet communism culturally and politically as well as Western capitalism. In conclusion, Russian/Soviet cultural institutions had a more niche impact, they empowered Iran's small communist subculture and gave an ideological framing to anti-monarchist struggle, but they also provided the monarchy and Islamists with a convenient villain (atheist communist culture) to rally against. The paradox was that Iran's Islamists and monarchists disagreed on much, but both opposed the infiltration of Soviet atheistic ideas. The cultural Cold War in Iran thus saw the Soviets losing out in soft power, even as the idea of resisting foreign cultural domination (Soviet or Western) became a shared principle of revolutionary ideology.

American Cultural Encroachment: Education, Media, and the Iran-U.S. Cultural Centers

By the mid-20th century, the United States had supplanted Britain as the most influential foreign power in Iran, especially after the 1953 coup. With this political ascendancy came a

[48] Mottahedeh, Roy, *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran*, One World, Oxford, 1985, 2000, p. 290

[49] Ibid

[50] al-Khomeini, Ruhullah. 1989. "The Letter | A Call to Divine Unity: Letter of Imam Khomeini to President MikhailGorbachev."Al-Islam.org.https://al-islam.org/call-divine-unity-letter-imam-khomeini-president-mikhail-gorb achev-sayyid-ruhullah-musawi-khomeini-1.

massive expansion of American cultural influence throughout the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. American involvement in Iran's culture began earlier, with missionaries, but later took on new forms through U.S. government programs and private American institutions. Ultimately, in the eyes of many Iranians, America became the prime example of cultural imperialism, the modern-day "other" that was seen to be corrupting Iran's identity and supporting an unpopular regime.

American Missionaries and the Foundations in Education

As mentioned previously, American Presbyterian missionaries had been present in Iran since the 1830s, even longer than most British missions. They primarily worked among Christian minority communities in northern Iran (Assyrian Christians around Urmia, for example) and later expanded to Persian communities.[51] By the early 20th century, the American missionaries had established reputable schools such as Alborz High School and similar schools in Tabriz, Hamadan, and Mashhad, as well as several hospitals and clinics.[52] As noted earlier, these schools had a curriculum rich in science and modern subjects and were often the best option for higher education in Iran before the development of a robust national education system. Many members of Iran's late Qajar and early Pahlavi elite (including secular intellectuals and even some members of the royal family) had their education shaped by these American schools.

Iranian reception of the Americans was initially somewhat warmer than toward the British or Russians, partly because the U.S. had no colonial history in Iran and presented itself as an anti-imperial nation (indeed, American diplomats in the early 1900s had supported Iran's

[51] The American University in Cairo. 2025. "The U.S. Presbyterian Mission in Iran— with Matthew Shannon: CR Amplified ep. 3." The Cairo Review of Global Affairs. https://www.thecairoreview.com/podcasts/the-u-s-presbyterian-mission-in-iran/.
[52] Ibid

integrity against European designs).[53] Iranian intellectuals around the Constitutional Revolution spoke approvingly of the American republican model. Thus, the American cultural presence in its early decades (1900s–1930s) was not seen as overtly threatening.[54] Nonetheless, as with British missions, the potential for religious controversy was real. The American schools taught the Bible and Christian ethics alongside secular subjects. Muslim clerics regarded this with suspicion. By the 1930s, as mentioned, Reza Shah's government absorbed these mission schools. The Americans, unlike the British who often had geopolitical aims, acquiesced to this relatively quietly. The missionary chapter closed with a mixed legacy: Iranians appreciated the educational uplift (the American College's alumni included many who later led Iran in various fields), but conservative society remained wary of Westerners teaching their youth.

Cold War Cultural Diplomacy: The Iran-America Society and USIS

After World War II, American presence in Iran transformed from small missionary outposts to a broad state-sponsored effort in cultural diplomacy. Especially following 1953, the U.S. poured resources into winning Iranian "hearts and minds" as part of the Cold War. Key instruments of American cultural influence included the Iran-America Society, the Peace Corps, and a multitude of educational exchange programs.

The Iran-America Society (IAS) was founded in the 1950s in Tehran as a bi-national cultural center. Its stated mission was to promote mutual understanding between Iranians and Americans. In practice, the IAS functioned similarly to the British Council mentioned previously

[53] Shannon, Kelly J. "Iran-US Relations." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History.* 25 Jan. 2019; https://oxfordre.com/americanhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.001.0001/acrefore-9780199329175-e-501.
[54] Ibid

but under American auspices.[55] It ran English language courses, hosted art exhibits, film screenings, lecture series, and maintained libraries full of English books and American publications.[56] The U.S. government strongly backed these societies: declassified reports show that after 1953 the U.S. embassy provided funding and direction, seeing the IAS as a tool to disseminate American values and to counter Soviet propaganda.[57] The Peace Corps also arrived in Iran in the early 1960s, sending American volunteers to towns and villages to teach English, science, and assist with community projects.[58] This further extended American cultural reach to the grassroots level.

From the perspective of the Shah's government, all this American cultural activity was largely welcome. The Shah was repositioning Iran as a modern, Western-aligned nation. American assistance in education and media was seen as beneficial for development. American universities formed partnerships with Iranian institutions (for example, the Pahlavi University of Shiraz was developed with help from the University of Pennsylvania, incorporating an American-style curriculum).[59] Thousands of Iranian students were sent to the United States on scholarships (the Fulbright program brought Iranian scholars to American universities, and many returned with advanced degrees).[60] In short, by the 1970s Iran was arguably the most "Americanized" country in the Middle East in terms of cultural links: English was widely taught

[55] Wainwright, Darius. "A 'Special Relationship?' American and British Soft Power in Iran, 1953–60." Ph.D. diss., University of Reading, 2019).
[56] Ibid
[57] Ibid
[58] Association for Iranian Studies. N.d. https://associationforiranianstudies.org/content/peace-corps-volunteers-iran-witnesses-1960s.
[59] Harnwell, Gaylord P. 2017. *Educational Voyaging in Iran*. N.p.: University of Pennsylvania Press, Incorporated.
[60] Fullbright Scholar Program. n.d. https://fulbrightscholars.org/institution/university-tehran.

and spoken among the elite, American brands and movies filled the marketplace, and even lifestyles in north Tehran mimicked California to an extent.[61]

Yet, under the surface, public resentment toward these American cultural incursions grew in parallel. Iran's traditional and religious sectors viewed the proliferation of American language and habits as a direct threat to Iranian-Islamic culture. To them, the Iran-America Society's activities might have looked innocuous, but they symbolized the Shah's regime giving foreigners free rein over Iranian cultural life. Ayatollah Khomeini, emerging in the 1960s as a bold critic of the Shah, vehemently attacked the regime's subservience to the U.S. One of his most famous early speeches, in October 1964, was a denunciation of the Shah's agreement to grant American military personnel diplomatic immunity (the "capitulation law"). Khomeini framed it not just as a political issue but a deeply cultural humiliation, "Even if the Shah himself were to run over a dog belonging to an American, he would be prosecuted. But if an American cook runs over the Shah, the head of state, no one will have the right to interfere with him."[62] This example was meant to illustrate how Iranian dignity and sovereignty were being trampled by blind subservience to foreigners. Khomeini's audience, including traditional bazaar merchants and seminary students, easily connected this loss of sovereignty with the presence of Americans in Iran's daily life. It was not abstract, by the mid-1960s there were tens of thousands of U.S. military and civilian advisors in Iran, living in their enclaves, often exempt from local norms. The perception of Americans as an entitled quasi-colonial class in Iran took root. Stories spread of Americans enjoying luxuries, high salaries, and behaving arrogantly, all under the Shah's protection.

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[61] Madan, Tanvi. 2019. "1979: Iran and America." Brookings Institution. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/1979-iran-and-america/.

[62] Khomeini, Ruhollah. 1981. *Islam and revolution : writings and declarations of Imam Khomeini*. Edited by Hamid Algar. Translated by Hamid Algar. N.p.: Mizan Press. pp. 182

The Iranian press (within the limits allowed) and oral culture began to weave an image of the Pahlavi court as irredeemably sold out to the West.[63] Many ordinary Iranians could point to tangible examples of cultural encroachment: for instance, the flood of Western (especially American) films and music in the media. State television in the 1970s showed American programming; cinemas screened Hollywood films widely. To modernists these were signs of progress and openness, but to conservative Iranians, American films with their perceived permissive morals were an affront to Islamic values.[64] The increasing visibility of Westernized Iraniansm women in miniskirts, men in Western suits, young people listening to rock music led clerics to decry a "cultural invasion" of immorality and godlessness. Jalal Al-e Ahmad's concept of Westoxication captured this: he explicitly blamed the Pahlavi modernizing elite for inflicting the disease on Iran by aping the West.[65] By the 1970s, revolutionary sentiment was fusing all these threads - the nationalist, the leftist, and the Islamist - into a shared indictment of American cultural imperialism in Iran. The religious establishment (led by Khomeini and militant clerics) emphasized the moral and religious corruption flowing from Western culture. They pointed to the proliferation of nightclubs, alcohol, and casinos often catering to foreign tourists and Iran's elite as evidence that the Shah was importing an un-Islamic way of life at Washington's behest.[66] In their view, cultural imperialism was dissolving Iran's Islamic character, thus they called for Islamic revival as the antidote. The secular nationalists framed the issue as loss of national independence. They recalled how the CIA had decided Iran's fate in 1953, and now through things like the Iran-America Society or the presence of American "advisors" in every ministry,

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[63] Borges, M. S. (2023). Suffering for/against the nation: Gharbzadegi and the tensions of anticolonialism in Iran. Millennium, 52(1), 109-134. https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298231194740 (Original work published 2023)

[64] Afary, Janet. 2025. "Iranian Revolution | Summary, Causes, Effects, & Facts." Britannica. https://www.britannica.com/event/Iranian-Revolution.

[65] Mackey, Sandra (1996). *The Iranians: Persia, Islam and the Soul of a Nation*. Dutton. ISBN 0-452-27563-6.

[66] Ibid

Iran had lost control of its own cultural and political destiny.[67] Even without direct colonial rule, Iran, they argued, had become a subservient state where foreign ideas overshadowed native ones.[68] These nationalists championed Iran's own cultural heritage (including the Persian language and Iranian history) against what they saw as a flood of foreign influence. Some leftist guerrilla groups even targeted symbols of Western culture in their attacks. For instance, in the early 1970s, the Islamist-Marxist Mojahedin-e Khalq organization bombed facilities they associated with Israel and the West.[69] This indicated that cultural centers were viewed by revolutionaries as legitimate targets representing imperialism.

The broad Iranian public, while not monolithic, was increasingly receptive to these arguments by the late 1970s. Tangible events reinforced the anti-American narrative. In 1978, during the tumult of protests, several incidents of violence against American institutions occurred. Protesters burned down or bombed sites such as the Iran-America Society's Tehran center, as well as offices of American companies and even the U.S. consular facilities.[70] American flags were a frequent object of street bonfires in demonstrations. Mobs attacked the luxury hotels and offices that were associated with foreigners. This captured how anti-Shah and anti-West feelings merged as one: Iranians were lashing out at any tangible representation of Western presence, seeing it as part of the system keeping the Shah in power. By January 1979, when the Shah fled, virtually all American officials and most citizens had evacuated Iran, and institutions like the Iran-America Society had shut their doors under the pressure.[71]

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[67] Afary, Janet. 2025. "Iranian Revolution | Summary, Causes, Effects, & Facts." Britannica. https://www.britannica.com/event/Iranian-Revolution.
[68] Ibid
[69] Abrahamian, Ervand. 1980. "The Guerrilla Movement in Iran, 1963–1977." MERIP Reports (March–April 1980): 3–15.
[70] Branigin, William. "U.S. Firm's Offices in Iran Bombed." *The Washington Post*, December 8, 1978.
[71] Wainwright, Darius. "A 'Special Relationship?' American and British Soft Power in Iran, 1953–60." Ph.D. diss., University of Reading, 2019).

The climax of this anti-Western, anti-monarchical fervor came with the establishment of the Islamic Republic. Ayatollah Khomeini, returning from exile in February 1979, consistently framed the revolution as not only a political change but a cultural purification. He spoke of a "cultural revolution" to rid Iran of the toxic influences of the West and of godless communism.[72] In 1980-1981, this took form as the regime purged universities of Western curricula and secular professors (the so-called Cultural Revolution, separate from but inspired by the political revolution).[73] The new government banned alcohol, enforced Islamic dress codes, and censored Western movies and music, all in an effort to reverse what they considered decades of Westoxication. The slogan "Neither East nor West" was enshrined in the Islamic Republic's foreign policy – meaning Iran would reject both superpower blocs culturally and politically.[74] Ironically, this was a rare point of agreement between the Islamist leadership and many secular revolutionaries, Iran should follow its own path and not be a playground for foreign cultural experiments.

In summary, American cultural institutions and influences, more than any other, became the lightning rod for Iranian anger in the revolutionary period. While those institutions had educated and benefited many, they also vividly embodied the loss of control and identity that so many Iranians felt under the Shah. The anti-imperial narrative that culminated in 1979 cast the Shah as a puppet and it cast the Iranian people in the role of defenders of an authentic culture,

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[72] al-Khomeini, Ruhullah. 1989. "The Letter | A Call to Divine Unity: Letter of Imam Khomeini to President Mikhail Gorbachev." Al-Islam.org. https://al-islam.org/call-divine-unity-letter-imam-khomeini-president-mikhail-gorbachev-sayyid-ruhullah-musawi-k homeini-1.

73 Shahrzad Mojab (Summer 2004), "State-University Power Struggle at Times of Revolution and War in Iran", *International Higher Education*, archived from the original on 2004-06-22

[74] Middle East Studies Program - University of Wisconsin - Madison. 2022. "The End of Iran's "Neither East nor West" Ethos." https://mideast.wisc.edu/2022/02/21/the-end-of-irans-neither-east-nor-west-ethos/#:~:text=With%20the%20revolution%20of%201979%2C%20Ayatollah%20Khomeini,US%2Dled%20late%20capitalist%20system%20wherein%20the%20US.

whether defined in Islamic or national terms, against an onslaught of Westernization. The success of this narrative can be measured by one surprising outcome: after the revolution, even leftist and liberal Iranians (who one might expect to be more pro-Western) largely acquiesced in or supported the expulsion of Western cultural influences, at least in the early years. The revolution had forged a new consensus that cultural independence was as important as political independence.

Cultural Encroachment and the 1979 Revolution's Ideology

By the late 1970s, Iran's disparate opposition movements had coalesced around a core set of demands and beliefs, and opposition to cultural imperialism was central among them. The idea that the Shah's regime had betrayed Iran's heritage and autonomy by allowing foreign domination provided a potent emotional rallying point. This section analyzes how cultural encroachment narratives became integral to the revolution's ideology and how they fostered a broad anti-monarchist coalition.

"Westoxication" and the Revolution

The term Gharbzadegi (Westoxication), popularized by Jalal Al-e Ahmad, became almost a keyword in revolutionary discourse. His writings deeply influenced both Islamist thinkers and secular nationalists. Al-e Ahmad had warned that Iran was in danger of becoming a mere hollow shell, its insides eaten by the weevil of Western machine civilization.[75] Revolutionaries took this diagnosis to heart. It framed the Shah's grand modernization programs (his White Revolution

[75]Borges, M. S. (2023). Suffering for/against the nation: Gharbzadegi and the tensions of anticolonialism in Iran. Millennium, 52(1), 109-134. https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298231194740 (Original work published 2023)

reforms, his technocrat-led economic growth, his glitzy 2500-year monarchy celebration at Persepolis in 1971) not as genuine progress but as a facade covering cultural subjugation.[76]

Al-e Ahmad's work also offered a cure: a return to one's "authentic self" – for Iran, that meant rediscovering indigenous culture and Islamic values as sources of resistance. Al-e Ahmad prepared an ideological ground where embracing Islam and Iranian identity was seen as inherently anti-imperialist. Notably, Ahmad identified the clerical establishment as potential allies rather than backward foes (unlike some earlier secularists). Al-e Ahmad in the mid-1960s wrote that the clergy were one segment of society still relatively uncorrupted by Westoxication, living among the people and preserving tradition.[77] This was a significant shift from earlier secular intellectuals who often saw the clergy as part of Iran's old establishment. By rehabilitating the image of the ulama, Al-e Ahmad helped pave the way for a coalition of secular and religious anti-Shah forces.[78]

When Ayatollah Khomeini emerged as the leader of the revolutionary movement in 1978–79, he skillfully harnessed these intellectual currents. Khomeini's speeches and writings frequently attacked not just the political dependence on America but the cultural enslavement that he believed the West had imposed. Khomeini believed that imperialists have imposed an unjust cultural order and that these same imperialists felt that the major obstacle in the path of their materialistic ambitions was Islam.[79] This painted the conflict in terms of an Islamic culture versus a Western materialist culture. Khomeini argued that the Shah was attempting to secularize and Westernize Iran precisely to remove Islam as an obstacle to foreign domination. This

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[76] Ibid
[77] Ibid
[78] VAROL, Fatih. 2016. "The Politics of the Ulama: Understading the Influential Role of the Ulama in Iran." https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/267123.
[79] KHOMEINI, ROUHULLAH, and Institute for Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini's Works. 2001. "TAHRIR AL-WASILAH." https://www.ijtihadnet.com/wp-content/uploads/3042.pdf.

narrative was effective in mobilizing the traditional base and it cast the defense of Iranian Islamic culture as a patriotic duty and a religious obligation.

On the streets during the revolution, slogans reflected these themes. Protest chants included phrases like “Esteqlal, Azadi, Jomhuri-ye Eslami” (Independence, Freedom, Islamic Republic) – the first word Esteqlal (independence) signifying independence not only politically but in choosing Iran’s own cultural path.[80] Even cinemas, symbols of Western cultural presence, became flashpoints with the most tragic example was the Rex Cinema fire in Abadan in August 1978, where over 400 people died in an arson attack.[81] The opposition blamed SAVAK (the Shah’s secret police) for the fire, suggesting the regime was punishing people who attended revolutionary-themed movies; the regime blamed Islamic militants.[82] Regardless of who was responsible, the event galvanized anti-Shah feelings and underscored the revolutionary notion that places of entertainment had become sites of political-cultural struggle. The Rex Cinema, showing a controversial film, turned into a coffin for hundreds and a rallying cry against the Shah’s brutality and it illustrated how deeply intertwined culture and politics had become.

Once the Shah was gone, the revolutionary regime moved rapidly to implement cultural change, signifying how important they viewed that domain. Universities were closed for a time and “cleansed” of Western or un-Islamic influences and professors seen as too Western-minded were dismissed.[83] The entire legal system was overhauled to conform to Islamic law and school textbooks were rewritten to emphasize Iranian and Islamic identity over admiration of Western accomplishments. The new rulers banned Western pop music from radio and instead played

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[80] Open Democracy and Asef Bayat. 2009. “Iran: a green wave for life and liberty.” https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/iran-a-green-wave-for-life-and-liberty/.
[81] Amanat, Abbas. 2017. Iran: A Modern History. N.p.: Yale University Press.
[82] Ibid
[83] Ibid

revolutionary anthems and traditional music.[84] Women's dress was an especially charged cultural symbol where the Shah's regime once had banned the veil in official settings, the Islamic Republic imposed the chador or hijab[85] as a compulsory dress code. These measures may be seen as the revolution's attempt to institutionalize an anti-encroachment ideology, to make sure Iran would not slide back into Westoxication.

The revolutionary narrative thus turned into policy. The departure of American personnel and the shutting of U.S. institutions in 1979 was followed, famously, by the takeover of the U.S. Embassy in November 1979 by Islamist student militants. The hostage crisis, which lasted 444 days, was justified by the occupiers with the rhetoric that the embassy was a "den of spies" plotting to subvert the revolution – in essence, that it was still a center of American political and cultural meddling that needed to be neutralized.[86] While the hostage incident went beyond cultural matters and became a major international crisis, its justification in the eyes of the hostage-takers and many Iranians at the time was rooted in that same anti-imperialist attitude: Iran would no longer be a playground for foreign plots or influence. The students even released documents from the embassy to prove U.S. interference in Iran's affairs historically.[87] In doing so, they further solidified the popular conviction that foreign institutions in Iran were invariably up to no good.

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[84] Ibid

[85] Keddie, Nikki R., and Yann Richard. *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*. Yale University Press, 2006. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vkwwc.

86 Kinzer, Stephen (October 2008). "Inside Iran's Fury". *Smithsonian Magazine*. Archived from the original on May 25, 2012.

[87] Ibid

Soft Power and Cultural Struggles in Today's Iran

The legacy of 20th-century cultural encroachment is very much alive in Iran today. Even after the 1979 Revolution ostensibly "cleansed" Iran of Western and Eastern domination, the battle of soft power continues in new forms. In the four decades since, Iran's clerical rulers have remained acutely aware of the influence of culture and information on public opinion so much so that they often speak of an ongoing "soft war" being waged by the country's adversaries.[88] This term, used frequently by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, refers to the perceived cultural invasion and psychological warfare orchestrated by the West to undermine the Islamic Republic from within. A striking development is the role of Persian-language media operating from outside Iran, which have become significant soft-power players in shaping Iranian public opinion. For example, BBC Persian, the BBC's Persian-language TV and online service based in London, and Voice of America Persian beam news and culture into Iran daily via satellite. During the recent nationwide protests (such as the late 2022 demonstrations after the death of Mahsa Amini), millions of Iranians turned to these outlets for uncensored information. The Iranian regime has reacted aggressively. In October 2022, Iran's Foreign Ministry sanctioned BBC Persian journalists by name, accusing them of "deliberate actions in support of terrorism, and inciting violence and hate speech and human rights abuses."[89]

Full Circle: Cultural Imperialism Comes Home

The Iranian regime has spent over forty years trying to engineer a monolithic Islamic-Iranian culture. It has enforced dress codes, dictated permissible art and music, and

[88]Niayesh, Umid. 2015. "Iran facing soft war-Khamenei." 3 trend. https://en.trend.az/iran/politics/2443029.html.
[89]Ghobadi, Parham. 2023. "Why reporting on Iran comes at a heavy price."
BBC. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-64222261.

revised history books – all to conform to its ideological vision. Khomeini in the 1980s spoke of a "cultural revolution" in Iran, and his successors continue that mission, whether by Islamizing universities or banning "un-Islamic" celebrations.[90] In doing so, they mirror the mindset of cultural imperialists: a conviction that one possesses the correct civilization template that must be imposed for people's own good. The targets in this case are Iranian citizens seen as contaminated by "Westoxication" or a lack of religious zeal. Many older Iranians who recall the Shah's era note the irony that today it is Iranian officials – not American advisers – who patrol the streets enforcing what music can be played or whether women wear proper hijab.[91]

In the Islamic Republic, cultural regulations extend far beyond dress codes. The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance closely monitors and censors films, books, theater productions, and music, ensuring cultural products align with the regime's ideological vision. Public education in Iran is tightly regulated, with school curricula heavily emphasizing revolutionary ideology, Islamic teachings, and nationalism, often at the expense of diverse perspectives or critical thinking.[92] This centralized cultural control parallels colonial-era practices elsewhere, where imperial powers dictated educational content to promote specific political loyalties or identities. As mentioned above, Iran's clerical leaders justify these cultural policies as necessary defenses against external ideological threats, a rhetoric reminiscent of colonial justifications used historically to enforce cultural dominance.[93] Ironically, they deploy the same logic of "civilizing" or "correcting" societal behaviors, but from an Islamic revolutionary standpoint. State authorities thus become arbiters of morality, defining what constitutes authentic Iranian

90 Amanat, Abbas (2019). *Iran: A Modern History*. Yale University Press. pp. 813–814. ISBN 9780300248937.

91 Zeidan, Adam. 2025. "Morality police (Iran) | Guidance Police, Gasht-e Ershad, Meaning, & Establishment." Britannica. https://www.britannica.com/topic/morality-police.

92 Kian, Azadeh. 2021. "Individualization and the Emergence of Personalized Politics in Post-Revolutionary Iran." https://www.irannamag.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/5.4E3-Kian-Irannamag-Winter2021-hk99-11-27-4.pdf.

93 Abrahamian E. A History of Modern Iran. Cambridge University Press; 2008.

identity, much like colonial rulers previously defined what constituted "modern" or "civilized" conduct for colonized populations.[94]

The scope of control the Islamic Republic seeks over culture rivals that of any colonial governor-general. In a sense, Iran's clerics internalized the lesson of imperial cultural dominance, but instead of rejecting domination, they appropriated it, wielding it to fortify their revolution's power. On the other side stand the Iranian people who resist the regime's heavy-handed cultural dictates. Here lies another irony: in fighting their own government's authoritarianism, Iranian protesters frequently brandish the language and symbols of the very West that the 1979 Revolution demonized. The young women burning headscarves and demanding freedom are, knowingly or not, echoing Enlightenment and liberal values that entered Iran via Western soft power channels. Protesters chant for democracy and human rights – concepts propagated by Western institutions and media. They organize via global social media platforms, use VPNs developed largely in the West, and garner support through hashtags that spread internationally.[95] Even the emphasis on individual rights and gender equality as rallying points can be traced to global discourses that have gained traction among Iran's youth. This is not to say the movement is directed by the West but the framework of the resistance is strongly influenced by ideas of freedom that Iran's revolutionary founders once lambasted as Western decadence. The paradox is profound. In 1978, mass protests in Iran featured slogans drawn from Shi'a Islam and anti-American movements. In 2022, protests featured as prominently the slogan "Woman, Life, Freedom," a phrase with universalist and feminist connotations that resonate in Paris and New York as much as in Tehran.[96]

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[94] Fanon, Frantz. 1963. The wretched of the earth. N.p.: Grove Press.
[95] Boston College News. n.d. "Behind the protests in Iran." https://www.bc.edu/bc-web/bcnews/nation-world-society/international/delong-bas-q-a-on-iran.html.
[96] Ibid

Thus, cultural imperialism's legacy in Iran is double-edged. The Islamic Republic's leaders accuse dissidents of being puppets of Western cultural imperialism since the opposition does eagerly consume and deploy Western cultural products. Yet those same leaders fail to see that their own rigid imposition of culture is experienced by many Iranians as a form of imperialism – an imperialism of domestic origin. When a young Iranian woman is told by state authorities what to wear, what to study, and what to think, she might well compare her situation to that of her great-grandmother who was told by colonial-influenced elites to remove the veil and embrace Westernization. In both cases, an external authority attempts to dictate identity. oung Iranians increasingly perceive state-imposed cultural norms as oppressive, restrictive, and alienating, mirroring feelings historically associated with colonial cultural domination.[97] The state's attempts to strictly enforce an "authentic" Iranian-Islamic identity have inadvertently strengthened cultural opposition, stimulating a reactionary embrace of global cultural norms among segments of society, especially younger generations craving autonomy and self-expression.

This internal cultural conflict highlights a broader phenomenon: cultural imperialism is not solely foreign but can also emerge domestically through authoritarian practices. Iranian intellectuals and activists increasingly frame their struggle against state-imposed cultural norms using language reminiscent of anti-colonial liberation movements. They advocate for cultural pluralism, individual autonomy, and the right to self-expression, ideals consistent with the spirit of anti-imperialism, yet ironically inspired by globalized norms once perceived as "Western" impositions.[98] The state's paradoxical attempt to defend cultural sovereignty through

[97] Khosravi, Shahram. Precarious Lives: Waiting and Hope in Iran. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv2t4cjb.
[98] Varzi, Roxanne. 2015. Last Scene Underground: An Ethnographic Novel of Iran. N.p.: Stanford University Press.

authoritarian control undermines the revolutionary ideals of independence and authenticity that originally legitimized its power. Thus, Iran's cultural landscape today reveals how easily revolutionary visions of cultural liberation can evolve into authoritarian mandates, repeating historical patterns of resistance and repression that the revolution initially sought to overcome. This environment can foster what postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha described as "hybridity," wherein new cultural forms and identities emerge not as mere imitations but as complex, syncretic creations born from the friction between official dogma and everyday lived experience.[99] These emergent cultures, often operating in subtle or coded ways, can represent a profound, albeit less direct, challenge to the state's homogenizing project, carving out spaces for alternative meanings and practices that defy easy categorization as purely "traditional" or "Western." The state's paradoxical attempt to defend cultural sovereignty through authoritarian control thus not only undermines the revolutionary ideals of independence and authenticity that originally legitimized its power but also, by fostering such complex hybridities, paradoxically helps shape a cultural landscape far more nuanced and resistant to simple directives than its architects may intend.[100] Thus, Iran's cultural landscape today reveals how easily revolutionary visions of cultural liberation can evolve into authoritarian mandates, repeating historical patterns of resistance and repression that the revolution initially sought to overcome.

The 1979 Revolution's ideology cannot be separated from the cultural context. The movement was not driven solely by abstract political theory or dire economic circumstances, it was to a great extent a cultural revolution in the eyes of its participants, a chance to purge Iran of alien influences and return it to its "true" path. Colonial cultural institutions from the past

[99]MAMBROL, NASRULLAH. 2016. "Homi Bhabha's Concept of Hybridity – Literary Theory and Criticism." Literary Theory and Criticism. https://literariness.org/2016/04/08/homi-bhabhas-concept-of-hybridity/#google_vignette.
[100]Ibid

decades - the schools, the councils, the media outlets - were, ironically, victims of their own success. They had succeeded in permeating Iranian society, but in doing so they triggered a response from the national body. The more pervasive Western culture became, the stronger the counter-movement to reject it grew, finding articulation in revolutionary terms. By 1979 that counter-movement had triumphed, at least in the public sphere, and Iran embarked on an experiment in forging a society distinctly set apart from Western norms. Whether that experiment has fully succeeded or at what cost is a matter for further research, but the revolutionary generation's motivations are clear: they truly believed they were saving their country's soul from an imperialist threat. As one era's reform and influence became the next era's "cultural aggression," the wheel of history placed those once welcomed foreign institutions squarely in the sights of a people's revolution.

Comparative Perspectives: Cultural Imperialism in Vietnam

Iran's experience with cultural encroachment and anti-imperial backlash in the 20th century was dramatic, but it was not unique. Other nations with strong identities and colonial or semi-colonial histories experienced similar dynamics. This section briefly compares Iran's situation with the case of Vietnam in Southeast Asia. Both countries faced intensive foreign cultural influence and underwent revolutionary or resistance movements that intertwined cultural and political liberation.

Vietnam: Colonization, War, and the Fight for Cultural Independence

Vietnam in the 20th century endured direct colonization by France and a later prolonged intervention by the United States, making it a pertinent comparison. Under French colonial rule

(1880s–1954), the French pursued a policy of assimilation or mission civilisatrice which had a heavy cultural component.[101] The French established Western-style schools throughout Indochina, including elite lycées in Hanoi and Saigon where instruction was in French and Vietnamese students were taught French history, literature, and values.[102] They also spread Catholicism through missionary efforts and often favored Catholic converts in administration, leading to the growth of a Vietnamese Catholic minority closely allied with French authority. French became the language of the educated class and government. While this created a small Francophile elite, it also alienated many Vietnamese.[103] The majority peasant population and traditional scholars saw the French-language education as a tool to detach the youth from Vietnamese Confucian heritage and nationalist sentiment.

The Vietnamese anticolonial struggle thus had a strong cultural nationalist streak. Rebels in the early 20th century sometimes invoked ancient heroes who fought Chinese cultural domination, equating the French with a new foreign culture to expel. After World War II, the Viet Minh led by Ho Chi Minh carried this forward. While the Viet Minh were communist in ideology, they also championed Vietnam's native culture.[104] The Viet Minh propaganda during the First Indochina War (1946–1954) emphasized throwing off not just the French rulers but the French way of life that had been imposed.[105] Schools in Viet Minh-controlled areas switched back to Vietnamese as the medium of instruction. Traditional arts and literature were promoted as part of building a post-colonial national identity. When the French were defeated in 1954, one

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[101] Duiker, William J. 2025. "Vietnam - French Colonization, Indochina, Unification." Britannica. https://www.britannica.com/place/Vietnam/The-conquest-of-Vietnam-by-France.
[102] Ibid
[103] "Vietnam: (3) Politique à l'égard de la langue officielle." n.d. L'aménagement linguistique dans le monde. https://axl.cefan.ulaval.ca/asie/vietnam-3Pol-lng-off.htm.
[104] Lacouture, Jean. 2025. "Viet Minh | History & Definition." Britannica. https://www.britannica.com/topic/Viet-Minh.
[105] Ibid

of the first tasks of the independent North Vietnamese state was a campaign of socialist cultural reform which included rooting out the influences of colonial-era culture and elevating folk culture and revolutionary themes.

In South Vietnam (Republic of Vietnam, 1955–1975), where the French influence persisted longer and was then supplanted by heavy American influence, the cultural battle continued in a different form. The Saigon government under Ngo Đình Diệm (1955–1963) and his successors was strongly pro-Western and it continued many French educational traditions and aligned closely with the United States.[106] The U.S. sent thousands of advisors and later troops, and with them came the American cultural footprint: English language began to rival French among the urban youth, American movies and music flooded Saigon, and American agencies (like USIS) opened libraries and cultural centers in Saigon and other cities, just as in Iran.[107] The Diệm regime, being Catholic-dominated, also privileged Catholic institutions and was seen by the Buddhist majority as culturally elitist and tied to foreign (Christian, Western) values. This led to the Buddhist Crisis of 1963, where Buddhist monks protested Diệm's suppression of Buddhist traditions and famously, Thích Quảng Đức immolated himself in Saigon.[108] Those protests were not only religious but had a nationalist undertone, accusing the regime of being out of touch with Vietnamese cultural identity. Diệm's fall in 1963 was due in part to his failure to navigate this cultural sensibility.

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106 "Origins of the Insurgency in South Vietnam, 1954–1960". *The Pentagon Papers*. 1971. pp. 242–314. Archived from the original on 14 May 2010. Retrieved 30 September 2019.

107 Masur, Matthew. n.d. "People of Plenty: American Cultural and Economic Programs in South Vietnam, 1954-1963." Ohio Academy of History. https://www.ohioacademyofhistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/2002Masur.pdf.

108 Adam Roberts, 'Buddhism and Politics in South Vietnam', *The World Today*, Royal Institute of International Affairs, London, vol. 21, no. 6, June 1965, pp. 240–50

During the Vietnam War (Second Indochina War, 1964–1975), the National Liberation Front (Viet Cong) and North Vietnamese communists made cultural propaganda a key part of their struggle. They depicted the Saigon regime as American puppets who were betraying the country's heritage. Communist radio broadcasts into the South emphasized how American soldiers disrespected Vietnamese customs and how the Saigon elite were indulging in Western lifestyles while villages burned. The famous slogan "Độc lập, Tự do, Hạnh phúc" (Independence, Freedom, Happiness) in Vietnam echoed "Independence, Freedom, Islamic Republic" in Iran's sentiment with independence at the forefront.[109] When Saigon fell in 1975, the victors quickly moved to eliminate vestiges of the old culture: renaming streets that had French names, converting Catholic schools to public use, banning Western media, and implementing socialist realist art as the official norm. Like Iran's revolutionaries, they believed that political liberation would be incomplete without cultural liberation.

What is especially interesting in the Vietnamese case is the intellectual debate that accompanied resistance. Vietnamese anticolonial thinkers actively deliberated how to marry tradition and modernity in the face of foreign encroachment.[110] Vietnam's anticolonial ideology was underpinned by a unique sense of national shame and dignity. Vietnamese intellectuals saw the loss of sovereignty as a humiliation that had to be avenged not only militarily but culturally. For example, the writer Nguyễn An Ninh in the 1920s argued that Vietnamese elites needed to stop blindly imitating foreign (Confucian or French) models and create a new, authentic Vietnamese intellectual culture, while another prominent figure, Phạm Quỳnh, disagreed with

[109] "Thêm nhận thức về 6 chữ 'Độc lập - Tự do - Hạnh phúc' trong Quốc hiệu Việt Nam." 2020. Báo Tuổi Trẻ. https://tuoitre.vn/them-nhan-thuc-ve-6-chu-doc-lap-tu-do-hanh-phuc-trong-quoc-hieu-viet-nam-2020090115531563 7.htm.

[110] Capa, Robert, Kevin D. Pham, and Sam Haselby. 2025. "How Vietnam earned its world-renowned anticolonial standing." Aeon. https://aeon.co/essays/how-vietnam-earned-its-world-renowned-anticolonial-standing.

Ninh on certain points. Quỳnh wanted to harmonize Eastern and Western ideas, retaining Confucian values while also embracing science and progress, in order to forge a modern Vietnamese identity without completely rejecting the West.[111] These debates – whether to reject foreign influence entirely or selectively adopt aspects of it, mirror conversations in Iran among intellectuals like Jalal Al-e Ahmad (who decried Western "toxins") versus more liberal reformers. In both nations, the ultimate revolutionary movements blended cultural restoration with political liberation. Vietnam's Communist Party in power certainly imposed its own brand of cultural orthodoxy (just as Iran's Islamists would), but the legacy of the anti-imperial struggle in Vietnam remains one where figures like Ho Chi Minh are celebrated not just for defeating foreign armies, but for preserving and elevating Vietnamese culture and pride on the world stage.[112]

Post-independence, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) aggressively pursued cultural policies aimed at decolonizing Vietnamese society. Education and media were comprehensively nationalized and ideologically reoriented towards socialist values and revolutionary heritage. Cultural campaigns targeted the eradication of colonial-era vestiges, including Western-style dress, literature, and even architectural styles, replaced by socialist realism and nationalist symbolism in public life.[113]

Today, Vietnam navigates complex cultural dynamics characterized by balancing historical legacies of resistance and socialist identity with contemporary global integration. State authorities still assert considerable cultural control, particularly regarding political expression and historical memory, but societal engagement with global cultural flows is vibrant and

[111] Ibid
[112] Ibid
[113] Bradley, Mark. 2009. Vietnam at War. N.p.: OUP Oxford.

unavoidable. Young Vietnamese increasingly leverage digital media, international educational exchanges, and globalized cultural products, showcasing their level of engagement with global trends and norms.[114]

This contemporary dynamic reveals a full-circle effect similar to Iran's experience, where historical resistance to cultural imperialism has paradoxically given rise to domestic cultural authoritarianism. The Vietnamese government, in defending national sovereignty and socialist identity, employs methods reminiscent of previous imperial cultural control, generating internal tensions and resistance. Younger generations, empowered by digital connectivity and exposure to global norms, now actively contest state-imposed cultural narratives, advocating for greater openness, individual expression, and cultural pluralism.[115] Consequently, Vietnam's contemporary cultural landscape is marked by the ironic reversal of earlier struggles, highlighting the persistent complexities and contradictions inherent in post-colonial identity formation and cultural autonomy.

One point of contrast is that Vietnam's revolution was spearheaded by a communist party which was secular. Thus, whereas Iran's revolution elevated religious identity, Vietnam's emphasized a synthesis of nationalism and socialism.[116] Yet, in both cases, foreign cultural institutions, be it the French lycées and missionary churches, or the American cultural centers and English schools, were seen as legitimate targets in the struggle. Vietnam's experience shows that even when a colonial power earnestly tried to create a collaborative indigenous elite through cultural assimilation, it often backfired which fostered a nationalist backlash that equated

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[114] Meyers, Jessica. 2017. "Their parents' lives were defined by war. Now Vietnam's youth are pushing the country toward a new identity." LA Times. https://www.latimes.com/world/asia/la-fg-vietnam-future-2017-story.html.

[115] Ibid

116 "Political system". Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Archived from the original on 21 September 2013.

independence with the rejection of foreign ways. In Vietnam, the antipathy was directed first at the French (as colonizers) and then at the Americans (as perceived neo-colonial intervenors). In Iran, it was the British and then the Americans (with the Soviets as a tertiary target). The pattern is that cultural imperialism often galvanized the very national consciousness it aimed to win over, ultimately contributing to the colonizers' defeat.

Conclusion

The role of colonial and foreign cultural institutions in Iran's 20th-century history was profound and paradoxical. On one hand, these institutions, schools, cultural centers, media outlets, and missions, contributed to Iran's modernization, introducing new knowledge, skills, and global connectivity. They educated generations of Iranians, exposed them to different worldviews, and in some cases even planted the seeds of the very ideals that would later fuel revolt. On the other hand, they also became potent symbols of national humiliation and identity loss, especially as the political context shifted toward authoritarianism under the Pahlavi Shahs and heavy alignment with Western powers. What began as cultural diplomacy and exchange ended up being perceived as cultural domination.

By the 1970s, many Iranians believed that their nation had become a "protectorate" of Western culture, not just Western political interests. The Shah's gleaming modernization, with its Western-educated elite, its permissive cosmopolitan social scene, and its marginalization of religious influence, looked to a large segment of the population like an alien transplant. The anti-Western narrative that coalesced was not merely state propaganda by revolutionaries; it

reflected deeply held popular sentiments that had been brewing for decades. The revolution of 1979 thus can be seen as the dramatic rejection of an entire cultural paradigm as much as a political one. In toppling the Shah, Iran's revolutionaries aimed to topple the "Westoxicated" ruling class and, by extension, to uproot Western cultural hegemony from Iranian soil.

The inclusion of a comparative case from Vietnam highlights that Iran's experience was part of a broader anti-imperialist wave in the post-colonial world. Each society had to wrestle with how much of the "West" (or foreign influence) to absorb and how much to resist in order to preserve a sense of self. Iran's solution under the Islamic Republic was to attempt an almost total cultural decoupling – an endeavor that has met with mixed success as globalizing forces continue to press in. Vietnam's post-revolution government likewise tried to seal off harmful cultural imports, though in recent decades Vietnam has reopened cautiously to global culture under a socialist regime.

From a historiographical standpoint, the Iranian Revolution's emphasis on cultural issues broadened the understanding of what drives revolutions. It was not a Marxist class uprising nor a mere coup but it was a mass movement with a moral and cultural vision at its core. The rallying cries from Khomeini down to the street protester were as much about preserving religion and culture as about installing a new government. The revolution thus embodied a synthesis of political and cultural revolt, a template that has since influenced Islamist and other cultural nationalist movements around the world.

In conclusion, Iran's 20th-century journey demonstrates the double-edged nature of cultural influence. Soft power can sometimes cut harder than hard power. The very institutions meant to win hearts and minds can end up alienating them if they are perceived to threaten a

people's identity. Iran in 1979 was a stark illustration: a nation with a 2,500-year-old heritage and a strong religious backbone rose up to say that no matter the material benefits of Westernization, it would not accept cultural subjugation. As Iran's revolutionary leaders wrote into their constitution, Iran would be an Islamic Republic true to its own ideals "Neither East nor West." The long-term outcome of that choice continues to evolve, but the historical verdict is clear on one point: cultural sovereignty was, and is, a non-negotiable demand for peoples who have shaken off colonial or neo-colonial domination. Iran's experience, amplified by parallels in Vietnam, underscores that when cultural imperialism is afoot, it often plants the seeds of its own eventual undoing at the hands of those it seeks to influence. Today, the legacy of cultural imperialism continues to shape Iranian society profoundly. Contemporary protests, such as those following Mahsa Amini's death, vividly illustrate that cultural autonomy remains central to Iranian societal conflicts. The regime's accusations of foreign interference and the protestors' embrace of universal human rights rhetoric further highlight the complexities of cultural imperialism's lasting impacts. The Iranian state's paradoxical attempt to defend cultural sovereignty through authoritarian means not only undermines the revolutionary ideals of independence and authenticity but also perpetuates cycles of resistance and repression.

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