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The Image of Imperial Russia as an Enemy in the Iranians' Collective Memory

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Abstract

This research tried to uncover the historical factors that have instilled a deep-rooted distrust of Russia in the Iranians' collective memory. The researcher employed a case study strategy to examine historical empirical data and analyzed the consequences of the conflicts between Persia/Iran and Imperial Russia through collective trauma theory. The research discovered that 1) the 9th–12th clashes and the Russo-Persian Wars in the 17th–19th centuries and their subsequent treaties of Gulistan, Turkmenchay, and later, Akhal, and 2) Imperial Russia's interventions in Iran during Constitutional Revolution, including the shelling of the Iranian Parliament in 1911, threatening Iranian government by issuing two ultimatums in 1911, the occupation and atrocity against Iranians in Tabriz in 1909–1918, the shelling of the Holy Shrine in Mashhad in 1912, and occupying Iran during Persian Campaign in the First World War in 1914–1918, which later followed with Soviet occupation from 1941 to 1946 in World War II, were among the primary factors which led to distrust of Russia in Iranian collective memory to the present. The evidence for anti-Russian sentiments in Iranian collective memory was identified as contempt in historiographical and literary works, hatred in religious circles, and Russophobia and conspiracy theories among Iranian politicians. The author concluded that the image of Imperial Russia as an enemy in the collective memory of Iranians has been shaped by the transgenerational and lasting effects of the memory of historical events, making the feeling of victimization toward Russia an integral part of Iranian contemporary identity.

Keywords: War, Intervention, Distrust, History, Literature

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Introduction

Despite the governments of Russia and Iran enhancing their relations, a series of incidents and actions by Russia or its representatives in recent years have led to strong reactions from Iranians and resulted in anti-Russian sentiments in both official political environments and media, indicating distrust of Russia among Iranians. Examples include the reenactment of the historic photo at the Russian embassy in Tehran by the Russian and British ambassadors on August 12, 2021 (Spencer 2021), the Russian ambassador's tribute to the Griboyedov monument in Tehran and his creation of the hashtag "We Remember" on February 10, 2022, the signing of the final statement of the Russia-[Persian] Gulf Cooperation Council meeting by Russia on July 25, 2023, which contained territorial claims against Iran, and Russia's support

for the opening of the Zangezur Corridor passing through Armenian territory on September 8, 2024. These intense reactions within Iranian society indicate that Iranians are highly sensitive to Russia's actions.

This article aimed to identify the historical reasons for Iranians' anti-Russian perceptions and to introduce manifestations of the distrust of Russia in Iranians' collective memory. The author posed questions related to the historical, cultural, and social dimensions of distrust and pessimism in Iranians' collective memory of Russia, asking what major historical events in Iran-Russia relations have occurred and what narratives and images of Russia have been created and rooted deep in the collective memory of Iranians. Based on the stated objective, the research hypothesis was, the traumatic confrontations between Iran and Imperial Russia (1721–1917) have led to a deep-seated distrust of Russia among Iranians extended to the present time.

The confrontations between Iran and Imperial Russia were considered independent variables. It was operationally defined through various wars, interventions, and occupations detrimental to the relations between the two countries. The dependent variable, i.e., Iranian distrust of Russia, was operationally defined by the manifestation of anti-Russian sentiments in historical accounts, literature, perceptions of religious circles, and rhetorics of Russophobia and expression of conspiracy theories in the political environment in Iran to the present time.

For the independent variable, the thematic scope included the most significant military, legal, and political events affecting Iran's territorial and political conditions as they seriously affected its territorial integrity and political independence. The geographical scope focused on Iran's northeastern and northwestern borders to cover military confrontations and territorial clashes between the two countries. It also included Iran's northern and central regions, which witnessed Imperial Russia's military and political influence. The temporal scope encompassed from the mid-17th century to the early 20th century; however, it did not refrain from examining historiographical accounts of the prior centuries. The dependent variable was situated in the thematic scope of historiographical, literary, and rhetorical manifestations of religious and political figures among the people and rulers' collective memory in Iran's geographical scope, within the temporal scope that extends to the present.

Collective memory and distrust are key concepts in this research, and defining them ensures the study's clarity, focus, consistency, and accuracy. Individual memories shared by members of a community bear on that community's collective identity (Wertsch and Roediger 2008). Collective memories account for the past shared by group members and pertain to their collective identity (Yamashiro and Roediger 2021: 311). Collective memories vary across generations and differ according to whether the events are personally experienced or learned from historical sources, further emphasizing the link between these shared memories and individual memories.

Distrust can foster and feed on suspicion, which is close to paranoia, and manifests itself in spreading doubt. Lenard (2019: 316) portrayed distrust as "an attitude that reflects suspicion or cynicism about the actions of others." Distrust is related to the distinct concept of mistrust.

"Mistrust reflects doubt or skepticism about the trustworthiness of the other, while distrust reflects a settled belief that the other is untrustworthy" (Citrin and Stoker 2018: 50).

Studying the historical roots of Iranians' distrust and pessimism towards Russia is essential because the relations between the two countries have improved for various reasons over the past decade. However, Iran's social context and a considerable part of the political environment, mostly reformist and nationalist circles, still show anti-Russian sentiments, which were reviewed in this work. These anti-Russian tendencies are usually intensely ignited by any provocative incident in the relations between the two countries. The dichotomy between Iran's political system's inclination towards increased cooperation with Russia and the public's distrust of Moscow's intentions towards Iran makes it essential to examine Iranians' perceived distrust of Russia. The political, security, military, and economic dimensions of the relations between the two countries and the geopolitical and security implications of Tehran-Moscow cooperation for the Middle East and Western countries also indicate the relevance of this research.

The limitations and challenges of Iran-Russia relations are often analyzed within the framework of geopolitics, considering political, security, and economic factors above all others. Even when the role of mutual distrust in hindering the development of Tehran-Moscow relations is highlighted, it stems from differences in foreign policy behavior and ideological foundations of policymakers in both countries. However, the role of historical factors and collective narratives and perceptions, shaped transgenerationally within Iranians' social context and inter-subjective environment, has not been thoroughly explored, creating a research gap.

To bridge the research gap, we must return to the past and identify and document empirical evidence in the context of history. The novelty of this research lies in its use of historical evidence to reveal the anti-Russian sentiments and distrust rooted in Iranian collective memory. The most significant contribution of the present work to expanding knowledge on the subject is explaining the influential role of Iran's historical defeats by Imperial Russia and its interventions in Iranian domestic affairs in shaping distrust, pessimism, Russophobia, and conspiracy theories in the Iranian collective memory.

Reviewing the Literature on Distrust of Russia

Researchers have yet to pay much attention to studying Iranians' distrust of Russia. Adequate research on this topic has not been conducted, and existing references to this distrust have been mainly partial and have yet to be the primary focus of scholarly studies.

Scholars have usually pointed to the decisive role of historical events and their destructive impact on relations between the two countries, especially from the perspective of the Iranian public. The fluctuating development of the relationship between Tehran and Moscow has been deeply affected by the legacy of historical conflicts between the two, as Koolaee, Mousavi, and Abedi (2020) demonstrated that the historical antagonism and negative perceptions persist, casting doubt and pessimism upon the prospect of more constructive bilateral relations. Historical clashes with Russia have caused Iranians to have

an unfavorable perception of Russia and its intentions toward Tehran. This distrust could be further affected by a lack of dialogue, as Asisian (2013) indicated, basing Iranian distrust of Russia on enduring historical problems that have resulted in their intense distrust of each other's intentions.

Although Iranians have always seen agreements between Russia and Iran as a representation of their victimization and exploitation by foreigners (Limbert 2017), this pessimistic picture finds its roots in Iranian society's distrust of global powers. This is especially true considering the imposed defeats and territorial losses on this country, which have led to the Iranians' distrust of foreign powers, which is not limited to Russia.

Similarly, some researchers have considered the image that Iranians portray of themselves as victims of major powers, including Russia, as arguable. For example, Zotova (2021) identified negative stereotypes and distrust of Russia among modern Iranians, claiming that the negative image of Russia is formed through selective and often erroneous interpretations rather than historical facts. Matthee and Andreeva (2018) studied the Great Game, showing that Iran was not a passive onlooker or just a victim and that its relationship with Russia was more complicated than can be understood through simplistic, one-sided theories. Previously, Matthee (2013) had followed the roots of Iranian contempt of Russians down to the 16th and 17th centuries, when the first diplomatic contact between Iran and Russia occurred during the Safavid Empire (1502–1736), and contextualized the Iranians' contempt and poor treatment of the Russians by Iranians in concrete geopolitical concerns, anxieties, and the sense of civilizational superiority the Iranians may have felt vis-à-vis Russians.

Methodology

This research utilized an explanatory design to elucidate the relationship between Imperial Russia's territorial expansionism and interventionism and Iranian distrustful perceptions of Russia in their collective memory. The researcher employed a case study strategy, concentrating on the temporal scope from Imperial Russia's battles with Persia within the context of the Russo-Persian Wars (1651–1828) and Constitutional Revolution (1905–1911) and ensuing events in the early 20th century to the present time. The research data gathering was conducted cross-sectionally, relying on a narrative literature review that combined data from primary and secondary sources to answer the research questions.

The author utilized pre-existing data from sources that examined various aspects and transformations in the relations between Iran and Russia. The discussion presented in this research qualitatively synthesized the findings and compared them to the tenets of collective trauma theory. Gilad Hirschberger (2018: 1-11) defined the term collective trauma as "the psychological reactions to a traumatic event that affects an entire society" and argued that "the process begins with a collective trauma, transforms into a collective memory" which "persists beyond the lives of the direct survivors of the events and is remembered by group members who may be far removed from the traumatic events in time and space". Stating that "members of victim groups may be less trusting of adversaries and more reluctant to compromise and

make peace…." he explained that "the memory of trauma may foster a paranoid... post-traumatic outlook..." (Hirschberger 2018: 11).

The current research explored Russia's historically detrimental actions against Iran based on the operational definition of the independent variable encompassing wars, treaties, and interventions. On the other hand, according to the operational definition of the dependent variable, the legacy of these confrontations in the collective memory of Iranians, specifically manifestations of historiographical and literary hatred, sentiments of religious circles, and Russophobic and conspiracy theories-related rhetoric of political figures, was explored.

Results

Imperial Russia's Territorial Expansionism in the 18th and 19th Centuries

The Russo-Persian Wars were a series of five conflicts between the two nations over control of the cities and villages in the Caucasus from 1651 until 1828. The Safavid Empire and the Tsardom of Russia (1547–1721) fought in the first Russo-Persian War (1651–1653). In 1722, Imperial Russia invaded Iran in what is known as the Second Russo-Persian War (1722–1723; the Persian campaign of Peter I) by using the deaths of Russian merchants in the seizure of Shamakhi in 1721 as the *casus belli* (Atkin 1980: 4). It came to an end on September 23, 1723, with the signing of the Treaty of Saint Petersburg, which saw Persia cede its possession of the provinces of Gilan, Mazandaran, and Astarabad as well as the territories of Derbent and Baku. The Treaty of Constantinople, signed on June 24, 1724, between the Ottoman Empire and Imperial Russia, divided significant chunks of the land of the adjacent Safavid Iran. Russia seized the northern Iranian provinces of Gilan, Mazandaran, and Astarabad, as well as parts of Dagestan, including Derbent, Baku, and the area around it in the Shirvan province.

The Third Russo-Persian War, i.e., the Persian expedition of Catherine II (1729–1796) in 1796, occurred after Imperial Russia designated Khartli-Kakheti Georgia as its protectorate in 1783 under the Treaty of Georgievsk (Hambly 1991a). Iran's response was a military march to Tbilisi in 1795 (Hambly 1991b), and Agha Mohammad Khan-e Qajar (1742–1797) captured Tbilisi. Tsarina Catherine II of Russia launched a campaign in 1796 to depose Agha Mohammad Khan-e Qajar in favor of his brother Morteza-Qoli Khan-e Qajar (1750/1755–1798/1800), later, a protégé of Imperial Russian (Shafiyev 2018: 16-42). However, it was unsuccessful because Russian forces were sent back home when Catherine II passed away.

One of Iran's most significant territorial losses occurred during the fourth Russo-Persian War (1804–1813). These setbacks culminated in the Treaty of Gulistan, the most critical military defeat suffered by the Persians at the hands of Russia, and significantly impacted Iranian territorial integrity. The Treaty of Gulistan which was signed on October 24, 1813, confirmed Russia's possession of nearly all of the cities, towns, and villages of the Khanates in the South Caucasus and partially in the North Caucasus, including the Khanates of Karabagh, Ganja, Shekeen, Shirvan, Derbend, Kouba, and Baku, as well as a portion of Talish

and the fortress of Lankaran. Additionally, Iran abandoned all claims to Daghestan, Georgia, Mingrelia, Imeretia, Guria, and Abkhazia (Baddeley 1908: 90). While impacting social and ethnic interactions in the region, the loss of these many provinces and cities with strong links to Iran also permanently withdrew a portion of Iranian territory from Tehran's jurisdiction.

Following the Treaty of Gulistan, Iran retaliated by attacking Russian territories in the Caucasus in July 1826. The Persians were compelled to file a peace suit after the Russian capture of Erivan and Tauris, which resulted in the Treaty of Turkmenchay in 1828. The Treaty was a clear admission by the Persians that they had lost control of the Caucasus to Russia on February 21, 1828, and that they had also given up control of the Khanates of Yerevan, Nakchivan, Talysh, and the Ordubad and Mughan regions, as well as territories that Russia had annexed under the Treaty of Gulistan of 1813 (Mikaberidze 2015: 664).

The anti-Russian sentiment was rife in Persia following the fifth Russo-Persian War's conclusion and the Turkmenchay Treaty's signing. On February 11, 1829, an enraged mob stormed the Russian embassy in Tehran and killed nearly everyone inside, including the recently appointed ambassador to Iran, celebrated Russian diplomat, and playwright Aleksander Sergeyevich Griboyedov (1795–1829), who had actively negotiated the parameters of the Turkmenchay Treaty (Hopkirk 1991: 112-113).

Decades later, in 1881, Russia enforced the Akhal Treaty on Qajar Iran, formally acknowledging Imperial Russia's acquisition of Khwarazm on September 21 (Adle 2005: 470-477). Due to the treaty, Iran would no longer assert any claims to any territory in Turkestan and Transoxiana, designating the Atrek River as the new border. As a result, Russia received Merv, Sarakhs, Ashgabat, and the adjacent regions (Curzon 2016: 189).

Russian Interventions in Iranian Domestic Affairs

Russia severely intervened politically and militarily in Iran during the 19th and early 20th centuries, particularly during the Constitutional Revolution at the beginning of the 20th century. The interventions were sometimes prompted by the demands from the Iranian governments, sometimes by Russia's geopolitical rivalries with major powers like the Ottoman Empire and Germany during the World War I, and Britain during the Great Game in the late 19th century. Sometimes they occurred in tandem with other powers, especially Britain during the World War I. The resistance of Iranians to the interventions and military aggressions of Imperial Russia in various northern, northwestern, and northeastern regions and capital, which often involved occupations, suppressions, massacres, and altering the political fate of Iranians, created an image of this empire as an aggressive enemy in the historical memory of many Iranians.

Alongside the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907, the most significant events related to Russia's intervention in Iran's internal affairs during the Constitutional Revolution were the shelling of the Iranian Parliament (1908), the occupation of Tabriz (1909-1918), issuing two ultimatums and marching military forces in Iran (1911), and the shelling of the Holy Shrine in Mashhad (1912). These were followed by the even more bitter Persian Campaign (1914–1918)

during the World War I, followed by the Soviet occupation from 1941 to 1946 related to the Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran in World War II (1939–1945).

Russia's imperialist policy and its deals with other great powers over Iran expanded within the context of the Great Game, which was accompanied by the decline of the central power in Iran and the increase in political relations between Russia and Britain against the rise of other powers such as the Ottoman Empire and Germany. The Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907 illustrates such developments. The convention, signed on August 31 in Saint Petersburg, ended the long-running dispute over Iran. Accordingly, Britain pledged to stay out of northern Iran, and Russia acknowledged that southern Iran was under British influence. The notion of a British-Russian conspiracy gained traction among Iranian literary, religious, and political figures following the 1907 agreement, as will be shown later. The Iranian government quickly realized that an Anglo-Russian alliance threatened Iranian sovereignty more than the two powers being hostile (Williams 1966).

The political changes in Iran, influenced by the widespread consequences of the Constitutional Revolution, jeopardized Russia's interests in Iran. Mohammad Ali Shah-e Qajar (1872–1925) opposed the 1906 constitution (Donzel 1994: 285–6). Imperial Russia backed Mohammad Ali Shah's authoritarian faction by spreading propaganda against the constitutionalists, supplying weapons, and providing financial support to Colonel Vladimir Liakhov (1869–1920), the commander of the Persian Cossack Brigade. After Mohammad Ali Shah was overthrown, Russian commanders unsuccessfully attempted to reinstate him (Muzaffar Maqam 2008: 675). Correspondence between Mohammad Ali Shah and the Russian ambassador to Iran revealed the Shah's request for Russian military intervention (Bashiri 1988: 102).

On June 23, 1908, the Persian Cossack forces, led by Vladimir Liakhov and other Russian officers, shelled the Iranian parliament (Cronin 1997: 61). This event marked the start of the "Minor Tyranny" (June 23, 1908 – July 13, 1909) in Iran. However, in July 1909, pro-Constitution forces from Azerbaijan marched to Tehran. Mohammad Ali Shah abdicated and fled to Russia. Moreover, the 1909 Tabriz uprising and its siege from 1908 to 1909 by the central government was ended by Russian intervention, which occupied the town and retaliated against its defenders and libertarians by killing many residents (Browne 2008: 74). This uprising was a pivotal event in the Iranian constitutional movement, which Imperial Russia and its agents brutally suppressed it (Clark 2006).

In 1911, the Persian parliament appointed the American financial advisor W. Morgan Shuster (1877–1960) to help manage the country's economic position. The Imperial Russian Army claimed that Shuster had violated the 1907 Anglo-Russian Convention (Abrahamian 2008: 55-58). On November 29, 1911, the Russian government issued a severe ultimatum to Iran (Minorsky, Bosworth, and Blair 2007: 496). The ultimatum demanded the dismissal of Morgan Shuster. The ultimatum sparked turmoil in Tabriz. The Russians responded by shelling the city with artillery and entered it on December 31, 1911. They subsequently conducted a court-martial and executed about 1,200 constitutional revolutionaries, along with their relatives and numerous civilians (Minorsky, Bosworth, and Blair 2007: 496).

In 1911, the Russian government complied with the Russian consul's requested assistance, sending entirely equipped forces with artillery to Mashhad (Wynn 2008: 263). As protesters took refuge in the Holy Shrine, the Russians reached their target. They began shelling it in April 1912, leading to the looting of valuables sent directly to the Bank of Russia while the shrine remained occupied, and 1,500 people were arrested or killed during the uprising (Adib Haravi Khorasani 1952: 264).

Russian and British forces invaded Iran again in December 1914, starting the Persian Campaign from December 1914 to October 1918. The Iranian Famine of 1917–1919, believed to have occurred due to the activities of Russia and Britain, was a calamity of massive proportions by millions of people – approximately 8–10 million, or 40–50% of Iran's population – perished due to starvation or associated diseases (Atabaki 2016). Russian political and military interventions in Iranian affairs, especially in the early 20th century, continued during the Soviet era until the second half of the 1940s.

Iranian Historiography: Image of Russians as Invaders

Historical books and narratives by Iranian writers first reflect events from the late 9th to the early 12th century (880–1175), with five occasions of Russian invasions, massacres, and plunder of local communities in northern and northwestern Iran. A common feature of Iranian historiography regarding the Russians is the portrayal of them as aggressive and invading from the first historical contacts in the 9th century.

The first recorded encounter between the two nations was the Russian attack on northern Iran in 880. Zahir al-Din Mar'ashi (1984: 302), in his *History of Tabarestan, Royan, and Mazandaran*, reported about the second Russian invasion: "...Meanwhile, a group of Russians boarded ships, emerged from the sea, and caused destruction in Tabarestan. The Samanids [819–999] tried to eliminate and completely defeat them...."

The third Russian invasion of Iran occurred in 914. Ibn Isfandiyar reported in *History of Tabarestan* (941: 266): "...In the following year, the Russians came in great numbers, and in Sari and its surroundings, they killed fifty thousand people and enslaved the population...."

The fourth raid of the Russians in 943 was recorded in the city of Barda. The fifth Russian invasion occurred in 1175 (570/571 AH). During this attack, in collaboration with the Khagan of the Khazars, they pillaged and looted the southern shores of the Caspian Sea, and two to three years later, they advanced on Shirvan.

The historiographical texts of the 19th century were also filled with accounts of the Russo-Persian Wars. Writers such as Abdol-Razzaq Beyg Donboli alias Maftoun (1762/3–1827/8), Mirza Sadeq the Chronicler of Morozi alias Homa (d. 1834), chronicler Mohammad Taqi Saheb Aliabadi (1784–1840), and Reza-Qoli Khan Hedayat (1800–1871) were among the significant historians who reported on the Russo-Persian wars. Kasravi (2004: 666), in his *History of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution* (1940), referred to Russian interventions in Iran's internal affairs and explained how Russia's efforts to support the autocratic government and prevent the progress of the constitutionalists were influential: "As we have seen, the

employees of the Russian government were assisting Mohammad Ali Mirza in overthrowing the constitutional movement."

Expressing Hatred and Distrust of Russia in Literature

Literature is a significant medium for collective memory, fulfilling various functions such as conveying historical perspectives and negotiating memory conflicts (Erll 2005). The bitter memory of defeat by Russia, on the one hand, and the protest against the cruelty and massacre of people by Imperial Russia's military, on the other, not only affected the politics but the society and collective memory and significantly reflected in Iranian literature resulting in numerous poetic and prose works about of Russians as cruel invaders.

In the case of distrust of Russia, several Iranian poets evoke shared emotions, fostering solidarity, and use resonant symbols to connect with collective consciousness, indicating the cruelty of Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union against Iran and its people. The first signs of the spread of resentful perceptions towards Russians in Iranian poems can be traced back to Khaqani, who described the devastating Russian invasion of Shirvan in 1174 in two odes (Forouzanfar 2010: 156), for example:

> "The Russ and Khazars have malicious intentions,
> they have denied the king of the crown
> Your victory in the war against the Russian army
> has become the celestial date of history"

The Russian raids and plundering of the Caucasian city of Barda in 943 were expressed in the epic *Eskandarnameh* (*Book of Alexander*), 1194) by prominent Persian poet Nizami Ganjavi (c. 1141–1209) (Dastgerdi 1962: 420-21):

> "No one seeks humanity from a Russian
> who lacks a single trait of humanity, but his jewels"

Iranian writers commenced the second wave of anti-Russian references after the Russo-Persian Wars. The origins of anti-colonial literature in Iran, dating back to the Russo-Iranian wars, initially referred to as "Jihadi literature," which evolved and reached prominence until the establishment of the Constitutional Revolution (Zaker Hossein 2000: 68). Poets of this school introduced new themes into their words in response to the ominous phenomena of war and Russian occupation. The "literature of regret" included a type of protest poetry about the Caucasian lands that expressed dissatisfaction with the incompetence of the Qajar kings. Mullah Mohammad Ali Hidaji alias Hakim Hidaji (1853–1928), referring to the hostile policies of Imperial Russia, wished that the brave kings and men of Iran's history, especially the heroes of Ferdowsi's (940–1020) epic, *Shahnameh* (*Book of Kings*, c. 977–1010), were alive to reclaim the lands occupied by the Russians in the Caucasus. According to the poet, surrendering to the Russian military's invasions was humiliation and disgrace, and nothing was worse for a Muslim than to submit to a group of Russians and foreign Christians and show servitude (Hidaji 1989: 83-147):

"All have become humiliated and degraded
submissive before Russia and foreigners…
It is fitting for me to sigh and lament
for Iran, which was ruined by the hands of Rus"

Most poems written in the 19th and 20th centuries about Russia contained themes such as references to oppression, occupation, and the dishonesty of Russia. Iranian poets sang about Iran's dependency on Russia and emphasized the disgrace of Iran's occupation by Russia and the necessity of standing against it.

The majority of references to the unreliability of Russians are observed in the poems of Mohammad-Taqi Bahar alias Malek o-Sho'ara Bahar (1886–1951) (Bahar 2008: 174):

"And if you say that Russia is not a traitor
look at history, and you will see wonders."

Mirza Abolghasem Qa'em Maqam Farahani alias Sanaei (1779–1835) paid special attention to events such as wars and negotiations between Iran and Tsarist Russia and was concerned about Russian encroachment on Iran (Yaqmaei 1988: 14):

"Isn't it a shame that in the land of Islam
Russia has turned into a vulture in search of carrion."

Persian prose has reacted to and commemorated events such as the Russian occupation of Tabriz (1909-1918) and World Wars I and II. The patriotic and freedom-seeking resistance of the Iranians against the Russian occupiers in various historical periods has been reflected in novels and plays. The collection of plays *Panj Namayeshnameh az Enqelab-e Mashroutiyyat* (Five Plays about the Constitutional Revolution 1966) and the novella *Toup* (Canon 1969) by the prominent Tabrizi writer Gholam-Hossein Sa'edi (1936–1985) depicted the situation in Azerbaijan during the early 1910s. The novel *Road of War* (2010-2020) by Mansour Anvari (1955) reflected the events of World War II from August 25, 1941, starting with the invasion of the country by the Russians from the northeastern Khorasan region and the occupation of Iran by the Allies.

Anti-Russian Sentiments in Religious Circles

In Iran, the Muslim clergy's role in confronting Russia was prominent. At some points in the early 19th century, they were the main driving force of a conflict whose narrative was based on the goal of reclaiming Islamic lands from Christians in the Caucasus. In the early decades of the 19th century, several leading clerics of that era issued fatwas for jihad (war against infidels) to oppose the Russians (Aghazadeh 2014: 148). Later, religious and anti-Russian motives influenced Mirza Masih Mojtahed's (1780–1848) role in the 1829 invasion of Imperial Russia's embassy in Tehran.

The confrontation between religious circles and Russia in contemporary Iranian history initially revolved around the declaration of jihad against Russia in the last Russo-

Persian War (1826–1828) by prominent clerics (Algar 1969) and in the early 20th-century confrontations during the Constitutional Revolution including the Russian ultimatum to the Iranian government, the occupation of Tabriz, and the bombing of the Holy Shrine in Mashhad.

These confrontations elicited reactions and intensified anti-Russian sentiments from influential clerics, leading to the issuing of a fatwa to boycott Russian goods and a general jihad against Russia by supreme Shia clerics. Najaf-based Akhund Khorasani (Ayatollah Sheikh Mohammad Kazem Khorasani, 1839–1911) was a significant anti-Russian religious authority, essential in opposing Russia during the Constitutional Revolution.

On December 31, 1911, Russian troops occupying the city of Tabriz executed Shiite Muslim cleric Seqat-ol-Eslam Tabrizi (Mirza Ali-Aqa Tabrizi, 1861–1911), along with 12 other Iranian nationalists, in retaliation for their opposition to the Russian invasion (St. Marie and Naghshpour 2011: 45). Grand Ayatollah Mirza Seyyed Mohammad Tabatabai (also known as Mohammad Sang-e-laji, 1842–1920) opposed receiving money from the Russians, whom he considered enemies of Iranians (Nazem al-Eslam Kermani 1387: 358-59): "I can't act in their favor if they give me this money... How can I abandon my nation and accept money from the enemies of my nation, money whose purpose I do not even know?" Later, Ayatollah Rouhollah Khomeini's quote, "America is worse than Britain, Britain is worse than America, and the Soviet [Union] is worse than both of them" (Khomeini 1964: 420), reflected a viewpoint repeatedly echoed in various forms.

Russophobia and Rhetorics of Conspiracy Theory among Politicians

While the social and cultural change in Iran meant that Iranians frequently resorted to conspiracy theories to account for new and contested realities, national and socio-cultural crises induced a "regression in mental processes" and facilitated the emergence of conspiracy theories in Iranians' views (Zonis and Joseph 1994). From the perspective of many people in Iran, every event, even the most insignificant ones, results from collusion and plotting by foreign powers, with hidden hands behind the scenes orchestrating it (Zibakalam 1995: 36). Relations with Russia, especially the Russian Federation in recent years, have been heavily influenced by this view, whose historical roots must be understood in light of the prevalence of this view among Iranians about the intentions of foreigners that hidden plotters directed Persian affairs in the embassies (Avery 1965: 40).

The combined role of political, cultural, and psychological factors in the spread of conspiracy theories among Iranians is better understood when considering the country's conditions from the late 19th to early 20th century: The weakness of Iran under the last three Qajar shah from 1896 to 1924 (Hedayat 1984: 169-170; 330-334), coupled with events such as the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1911; the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907; the occupation of Iranian territories by Great Britain, the Imperial Russia, and the Ottoman Empire during World War I; the abortive 1919 Anglo-Persian agreement, by which Iran was to become a kind of semi-protectorate; and the British-backed coup d'état of 1921, which led to the establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty, the United States-British-backed 1953 Iranian

coup d'état, which toppled Mohammad Mosaddegh's (1880–1967) democratically elected government, encouraged the development of conspiracy theories among Iranians focused on foreign powers.

One of the most significant conspiracy theories that penetrated deep into the Iranians' perceptions toward Russians was *The Testament of Peter the Great*, forged by Polish emigrants in Paris in 1795 (Groh 1995: 28-30). Belief in its authenticity spread among anti-Russian Persians (Makki 1978-1979: 9). According to the *Testament*, the Russians had two primary secret objectives: to subjugate Europe and conquer Persia, thus obtaining access to the Persian Gulf.

Khan-Malek Sasani, an influential diplomat and ardent conspiracy theorist, supposed the massacre of Alexander Griboedov and his staff in Tehran was a British plot intended to encourage Russia to annex the Caucasus and make further advances into Persia (1952: 1-6), claimed that British agents had tricked the Russians into shelling the shrine of Imam Reza in Mashhad in 1912 to foster Persian hatred of the Russians (1952: 63-68). Mohammad-Reza Shah thought that the assassination attempts on him in 1950 and 1966 were communist plots with British sympathies (Alam 1991: 122). In the late 1970s and early 1980s, numerous old-guard politicians and middle-class Iranians viewed the Islamic revolution, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the occupation of the American embassy in Tehran as evidence of a Soviet scheme to achieve the goals outlined in *The Testament of Peter the Great* (Malek 1981: 14-51).

The exiled Mohammad-Reza Shah, while attributing events in Iran to the "Unholy Alliance of Red and Black" [Iranian communists and Islamic fundamentalists] (Pahlavi 1980: 145), claimed that events in Iran and Afghanistan were evidence of a grand Russian and American conspiracy (1980: 155). Russophobia in Iran during the Pahlavi era was a function of Iranians' general xenophobia, influenced by events from the early to mid-20th century.

Despite the close relationship between the Islamic Republic, particularly its current supreme leader, and the Russian Federation, anti-Russian views have been observed among its institutions and political figures, especially in the Iranian parliament. For example, the Political Studies Office of the Iranian Parliament Research Center (Jafari, Tavakkoli, and Safari 2011) published a report on the history of Iran-Russia relations while saying:

> "...the history of the two countries' relations, which is full of interventions and abuses of Iran's position by this country [Russia], can serve as a historical and instructive lesson... The never-ending demands of the Russians from Iran seem important…. They still maintain their past perspective towards Iran and… to impose their colonial demands on Iran through various means."

Ali Motahari, a representative close to the fundamentalists in the Iranian parliament, believes that Russia has infiltrated Iran's political system and found supporters, played a role in the takeover of the US embassy, was involved in the assassination of his father, Morteza Motahari, an anti-Marxist cleric, and recently did nothing in Syria in response to Israeli attacks on Iranians. Heshmatollah Falahatpishe, a representative close to the reformists in the

Iranian parliament, believes that "Russia immediately sells out Iran on every issue" (Khabar Online 2024). Mahmoud Sadeghi, a reformist representative in the Iranian parliament and a critic of Russia, believes that Iran is officially a hostage of Russia (Sadeghi 2022). Mostafa Kavakebian, a reformist representative in the parliament, also considers Russia untrustworthy, believes Putin's promises should be even doubted (Kavakebian 2022).

Conclusion

The research tried to use historical evidence to demonstrate that Imperial Russian policies have significantly impacted modern and contemporary Iranian history and consequently shaped Iranian collective memory, as shown by its manifestations in the Iranian historiography, literature, and religious and political environments. Identified evidence showed that Wars, losses, and treaties with Russia and the numerous cases of interventions and occupations of Iran have had the most significant historical resonance for Iranians.

The historical background (i.e., despise of Russians as early as the 9th century) and multiple defeats and loss of territory (e.g., to cede what is present-day Azerbaijan, Armenia, eastern Georgia, and southern Dagestan (Kazemzadeh 1991) and south Turkmenistan to Imperial Russia increased the feeling of insecurity towards Russia among various sections of the Iranian society, from ordinary people to religious and political figures, and even rulers. It has also had intellectual resonances, as seen in the numerous historiographical accounts and the emergence of literary schools expressing longing and nostalgia for the lost Caucasus territories and resistance to foreign invaders. This research demonstrated that many of the most prominent religious figures held strong social bases in Iranian society and took resistant stances against Russia. They expressed distrust and anti-Russian sentiments against Russia's aggression in Iran, from declaring jihad against invasive Russia in wars to boycotting Russian goods during the Constitutional Revolution period. Contemporary and recent influential politicians from various political systems and spectrums, whose references to Russia were examined in this research, have demonstrated numerous cases of Russophobia and conspiracy theories, further contributing to the Iranian distrust of Russia.

Although it is not correct to describe the reciprocal relations between Iran and Russia in past centuries as entirely confrontational and contentious, since in numerous instances, remarkable cultural and economic collaborations have also been observed, bitter memories of battles, forced treaties, occupation, annexation of Iranian (or at least, Iranian-claimed) territories, political interventions, and military suppressions of locals primarily characterize the relations between Iran and Russia in historical perspective. Iranians' perceptions of Russia as an imperialist power were reinforced by the consequences of Imperial Russia's regional adventures and the territorial losses Iran suffered as a result of the Russo-Persian Wars between 1651 and 1828, and solidified by Imperial Russia's undermining role in the Iranian Constitutional Revolution and subsequent Persian Campaign. These events are the primary historical sources of the Iranians' continued distrust of Russia, which was followed by the Soviet invasion of Iran in World War II and its aftermath.

As indicated before, the collective trauma theory focuses on the psychological and social consequences, including defeats. Iran's military defeats, territorial losses, experienced suppressions, and perceived conspiracies from Imperial Russians could be situated in the context of historical trauma collectively experienced by the nation, mainly from the late 17th to the early 19th centuries, further intensified by Russian interventions in Iranian domestic politics thereafter to the early 20th century. As demonstrated in the present research, the memory and consequences of its harmful impacts have been passed down through generations by various Iranian historiographical, literary, religious, and political reactions.

The collective trauma theory suggests that national trauma can affect a nation's identity, psyche, and behavior. Accordingly, Iranians' distrust of Russia is one consequence of this psychological effect on their collective memory, making the feeling of victimization toward Russia an integral part of Iranian contemporary identity. This theory resonates with Hirschberger's (2018: 1) argument, which states that "collective trauma culminates in a system of meaning that allows groups to redefine who they are and where they are going". In this context, the Iranian distrust of Russia is a result of wars and its interventions in Iran's affairs, which, as they have commonly expressed through their historiographical, literary, religious, and political reactions, it harmed Iran's territorial integrity and independence.

Hirschberger (2018) explored how collective trauma can elevate existential threats and prompt groups to construct a trans-generational collective self. The collective identity of Iranians as victims of the hostile actions of Imperial Russia has developed over several generations. This aligns with the concept of intergenerational transmission, as suggested by trauma theories, and is a barrier to peacemaking (Schori-Eyal, Klar, and Ben-Ami 2017). The collective memory of a calamity suffered in the past by a group's ancestors (here, Iranians from the mid-17th century) has given rise to a "chosen trauma" dynamic that weaves the connection between trauma, memory, and ontological security (Volkan 1997) - in this case, regarding Russia's malicious intentions, whether Imperial, Soviet or even Federative.

The research tried to elucidate the relationship between traumatic historical confrontations between the two countries and Iranian distrust of Russia by presenting this research's findings to test the hypothesis regarding the connection between these traumatic events and Iranians' distrust of Russia to the current time. Connecting the historiographical, literary, religious, and political reactions as evidence for research variables utilizing the theoretical rationale of trauma theories, the author confirms the hypothesis that Imperial Russia's actions towards Iran contributed to Iranians' continued distrust of Russia and anti-Russian sentiments.

The political culture and psychological characteristics of Russians require further study. A deeper understanding of the differences in the two countries' political cultures may help to comprehend the reasons behind many events in the mutual relations between Iran and Russia. A study of Iranians' political culture and psychological characteristics is recommended to achieve this.

Future research is recommended to explore the contemporary transformations in Iran-Russia relations, especially after the mid-20th century, considering the Soviet Union and the

Russian Federation. Subsequent studies could delve into the specific differences during this period, enhancing our understanding of the persistent historical events that have intensified Iranian distrust of Russia.

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