

2020 Premier’s History Teachers Association History Scholarship

Iran

Making the Inaccessible Accessible

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# Introduction

When teaching History, current affairs often come up in discussion as students try to understand cause and effect with events they hear of in the news. Most of the media they’re exposed to regarding the Middle East relates to terrorism, and their view of Middle Eastern history is clouded by what they access in the media. The concept of the “Middle East” is explored by Keddie (1973), indicating the ignorance of this term in itself; it relates to a geographical area spreading across a broad range of countries, but within it lie many ethnicities, nationalities, languages, cultures and histories. The Ancient Achaemenid Empire spanned almost all of what is now known as the Middle East, yet the heart of this empire was centred in today’s Iran. It is the Iranian people who have claimed cultural descent from the Persians, and their language and religion differ from surrounding countries. Modern Iran raises religious, economic, political and social issues, providing great scope for inquiry based learning as materials are not readily accessible to students via a textbook.

This topic is important because student engagement is the key to inspiring a love of learning. With ready access to a great deal of material through the internet, students often mistake instant knowledge for deep learning, disengaging when they believe they have the answers available to them. Studying Iran provides great opportunity for discussion, with vastly opposing opinions and perspectives, opening up historical debate and fresh interpretation of unseen sources as students engage with primary evidence. This study provides an overview of key concepts, as well as an introduction to historiography, drawing from a wide range of sources and perspectives. Scholars were targeted not only for their area of expertise, but also due to their own historical context and story of either living through the 1979 Revolution either in Iran or as a recent refugee, but also because of their context following on from the revolution, living working and studying in western countries.

# Focus of Study

The main focus of study was to meet with scholars who specialise in 20th Century Iran and collate their perspectives to make the historiography accessible to teachers and students. Much of the material available on this area of study is pitched at a tertiary level, so the focus was on collecting sources, both primary and secondary, and engaging in discussion with historians to really understand their perspectives. The longer term goal is to synthesise the information to develop appropriate texts, source analysis and programming ideas to support teachers in the delivery of units on 20th Century Iran, with a specific focus on the Stage 6 Modern History National Study.

The majority of the scholars visited on this study tour had a first-hand experience of living through the 1979 Iranian Revolution, or its aftermath. Their areas of expertise varied across economic, political, religious and social history, allowing for great breadth to the discussions and the opportunity to explore different facets of the National Study Syllabus for Iran.

Much of Iran’s 20th Century history evolved as conflict emerged regarding a contradiction between ancient Persian ways and more recent religious interpretations of societal norms. This study tour enabled an exploration of a range of voices, including both moderate and extreme feminist viewpoints. By collating resources, teachers can expose students to the largely unexposed complex ideas in Iranian history.

Preliminary reading of the work of Abrahamian (1982, 1989, 1993, 2013 & 2018) provided a foundation from which to compare and contrast the work of other historians. In Amsterdam, the focus was on examining documents in relation to the Marxist Left and Labour positions regarding Iranian politics (Atabaki, 2009). In the United Kingdom, consideration was given to the popular responses to the Iranian Revolution, from both western and non-western perspectives, as well as the economic elements which contributed to the revolution (Matin, 2015). Of significant interest was interviewing Professor Lloyd Llewelyn-Jones on his forthcoming work presenting a narrative history from the Achaemenid Period through to present day, examining the ideological perspectives and contrast between Persian ideals, modern Iran and fundamentalist approaches. This was consolidated with a workshop at the University of Oxford with Dr Vahid Nick Pay, considering the role of ethnicity and religion in the Iranian Revolution. The British Museum’s Special Exhibition “Inspired by the East: How the Islamic World Influenced Western Art” provided insight into cultural expressions of the impact of the revolution.

In the United States of America, the focus was on primary sources, examining the Iranian Oral History Project at Harvard University and the Kate Millett Documents at Duke University. In addition, insight was gained into the work of Friedman (2018), Amanat (2018) and Moazami (2013), with Dr Behrooz Moazami also providing the opportunity to work with students on their Middle Eastern Conference. My interview with Dr Negar Mottahedeh provided unique insight into cultural expression and feminist perspectives, with examples of integrating popular culture as sources (Satrapi, 2003).

# Significant Learning

When studying Iran in Australia, western media is the usual source of information. Consequently, our understanding is shaped largely by the struggle witnessed between the capitalist west and Islamic fundamentalist perspectives. The focus of study for the Stage 6 Modern History National Study of Iran falls directly within the Cold War era of 1945-1989. Complicating the study is the fact that while the Shah saw himself as an ally of the United States of America, and rejected growing Arab Nationalism in surrounding countries, Iran came into conflict with the US prior to the Ayatollah Khomeini’s regime, demonstrating the competing rivalry in the context of Cold War politics. As a result, the usual history studied with regard to Iran is shaped by an Australian capitalist perspective, often not giving a voice to the perspectives of those who supported aspects of the revolution, Iranian perspectives at the time and the interpretation of Iranian scholars afterwards.

Prior to this study, most mainstream interpretations presented the 1979 Revolution as a religious revolution, with a shift from a secular state under the Shah to an Islamic Fundamentalist regime under the Ayatollah. It is true that there was a religious shift, but the learning across this study identified that in fact many Iranians were struggling with the concept of a highly secular state, but most importantly, that the revolution was largely political and economic in nature, with significant social and cultural impacts.

## Political History

My intended learning at the Institute of Social History in the Netherlands was truncated due to the rise of political tension between Iran and the US. A number of groups in Amsterdam were lobbying for peace in the streets and I opted to maintain a low profile. However, this brought to life the ongoing legacy of the revolution in a global sense, with its impact still resonating today. I was fortunate to obtain copies of Atabaki’s (2009) work unpacking the historiographical shift in relation to Iranian history. His work demonstrates the shift from anecdotal story-telling to rigorous analysis of political and economic factors. Atabaki’s stance is that the 1979 Revolution was a constitutional reform, providing merit to the view that Iran’s revolution was significantly more than a return to religious fundamentalism. His analysis of Abbas Amanat’s consideration of the revolution as a constitutional reformation provides great scope for students to grapple with competing approaches.

It was invaluable to contrast these scholarly perspectives with accounts available in Harvard University’s Iranian Oral History Project. The collection has been largely digitised, clearly categorised by theme and language, making these primary sources available to teachers and students in Australia. Of particular interest was the testimony of Stuart Rockwell from 1987, where in Tape 1 of his collection, he recalls the difficult nature of his role first as the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs and then as Minister at Tehran in the Embassy. His narrative on the shift from a seemingly westernised state, purporting western ideals and traditions, while gradually removing democratic freedoms for the Iranian people, provides great insight into the incongruence between the Shah’s propagated vision and reality. Consequently, through the perspective of a US Government official, we can learn of the political factors contributing to widespread support for the overthrow of the Shah.

## Economic History

The most significant learning relating to economic elements of the Iranian Revolution was in reviewing the work of Friedman (2018), Matin (2015) and Kinzer (2008). While Matin’s work is largely focused on the socio-political dynamics of the 1979 Revolution and the rise of political Islam, he articulated that underpinning this was economic stress and distress, which is supported by the work of Friedman. Friedman provided a different perspective as an economist rather than a historian, with great insight into the relationship between Cold War politics and economic crisis. He claims that the Tudeh’s (Communist Party) support for the Ayatollah was economically motivated, with Soviet influence driving the desire to eradicate imperialism and shift to an economic and political model like Salvador Allende in Chile. Friedman identified the growing economic concerns in the period 1953-1979, with 1978 marking the point where there was a significant interest displayed by the Soviets.

Previously, I had not considered Cold War politics from an economic perspective, but only from a political perspective. The shift in thinking has allowed for a broader understanding of the interrelationship between the different facets contributing to the revolution.

## Religious History

I was fortunate to work with Dr Vahid Nick Pay at the University of Oxford. His work focuses on the relationship between religion, ethnicity and politics in conflicts. He suggested that unlike eastern religions where humans do not have the capacity to relate to god, so nature and the beauty of nature are observed to understand god, western religions, including Islam, assert that humans are the best thing created by god so there is a direct relationship that can be had. Consequently, identifying god in cause wields great power, particularly as god demands moral righteousness and social justice, so religion can persuade others to act in ways that are presented as morally sound. Dr Pay was clear in stating that it is difficult to see religion and politics as distinct when looking this period of Iranian history. He argued that religion as an identity marker is witnessed in a variety of ways, including active, passive, focal and peripheral. Pay’s stance was that out of 6000 verses in the Quran, 200 are explicitly legal and juridical, meaning that it’s very easy to unite religion and politics in Islamic nations. Furthermore, the Quran says to obey the prophet and obey those in authority.

This background provided an essential foundation for understanding the rise of the Ayatollah Khomeini. Dr Pay explained that the concept of monarchy is a pre-Islamic Iranian invention, meaning that Khomeini saw it as something that had to be abolished, calling for the establishment of an Islamic state. He stated that this was not a new concept, with secular ideologues behind the idea of an Islamic State including Ahmad Fardid (1909-1994), Jalal al-Ahmad (1923-1969) and Ali Shariati (1933-1977). He outlined the concept of Fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), which is considered complete and can address all problems of a modern state.

While the work of Dr Pay justified the rationale for an Islamic State and provided evidence to suggest that it was logical for the Ayatollah to align religion and politics, Dr Behrooz Moazami presented strong opinions when interviewed to suggest that the religious aspects were purely for manipulation, with the Ayatollah preying on the Iranian people who were in despair with their loss of democratic practices under the Shah, and were desperate for change. He suggests that the political revolution was needed, but that the religious revolution went beyond the scope of people’s demands. Dr Moazami suggested that if the religious aspects of the revolution had not been so dogmatic, that perhaps Iran would have stabilised and been successful in its revolution. Dr Moazami provided me with the opportunity to work with students at Loyola University as they planned for a Middle Eastern politics summit, inviting students from universities across the United States, to discuss the ongoing impact of conflict and human rights breaches as a result of change in 1979.

Professor Lloyd Llewelyn-Jones of Cardiff University has worked in Iran for more than 20 years. When interviewing him regarding his forthcoming work which is a narrative history of Iran from ancient to modern times, he indicated that he did not see the 1979 Revolution as religious at all, but that it was politically and economically motivated, with religion used as the umbrella to shape and drive a cultural shift.

## Cultural & Social History

My time at the University of Oxford with Dr Vahid Nick Pay allowed me to better understand the nature of ethnicity in conflicts. He provided insight into the work of Pierre Van den Berghe on primordialism, indicating that biological impulses rather than cultural or material interests, drive ethnocentric psychology. From this, Dr Pay asserted that the concept of ethnicity is ancient rather than a modern construct, but that it’s complicated when considering national groups which aren’t necessarily ethnically group. This adds layers of complication to Iranian history, with roots back to the Aryan ethnicity even prior to the Achaemenids, yet there are other ethnic groups within their society too. Consequently, Van den Berghe’s theory of primordialism can’t apply, as Iranian nationalism is constructed based on a modern national border. This suggests that political factors have presented themselves as cultural factors, garnering support among the people of Iran. This notion prompted thinking regarding the causes of the revolution.

The most significant find throughout this study in relation to cultural aspects of the revolution was in the Kate Millett documents at Duke University. When interviewing Dr Negar Mottahedeh, we discussed her work on the Whisper Tapes. Kate Millett, an American feminist, arrived in Iran in 1979 only weeks after the Iranian Revolution. Her goal was to support Iranian women as they marked International Women’s Day, but this resulted in a full week of protests. Millett captured the voices of women at the time, providing insight into their perspective on the revolution, including with regard to cultural expectations, dress codes that were newly mandated and societal customs they were expected to adhere to. Dr Mottahedeh provided a fresh perspective on the slogans and habits of the revolution, as well as providing insight into the motives behind the women’s movement. Her work critiques some of the extreme dogmas presented by Millett, who was considering the situation only from her westernised context. To aid my understanding of Dr Mottahedeh’s interpretation, she provided access through the Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library at Duke University. Some of the collection is digitised, but the archivists retrieved many boxes from storage for physical inspection.

The most useful aspect of trawling through the documents was in realising that this can be a document study that can be completed by students. The Library has a comprehensive catalogue of all documents, and upon request, they’ll retrieve any document and provide a digital copy. Millett collected newspaper articles from Iranian and American newspapers at the time, demonstrating the ability to shape narratives through use of language to provide different meaning regarding the same facts. It was an invaluable exercise exploring the construction of history and how sources must be questioned and corroborated in order to find truth. Dr Mottahedeh also suggested the use of Satrapi’s (2013) work Persepolis, using popular culture as a lens through which to view the social and cultural impacts of the Iranian Revolution. Finally, Mottahedeh suggested that the White Revolution wasn’t a revolution at all, and that social reforms as a result were merely a political tool for shaping social change. This is an area I’ll explore in further depth.

### Museum Collections

Giving voice to the cultural and social elements of Iran’s history were the various pieces in The Met’s (Fifth Avenue location) West Asia art collection, which included revolution art. The British Museum’s Special Exhibition titled Inspired By The East: How the Islamic World Influenced Western Art contained a chronologically organised visual display of the shift from orientalism in Iranian portraiture to western militaristic ideology through the Shah and his family. Both of these collections have online resources that can be access by students to see cultural evidence highlighting the political and social changes across the period of study.

# Conclusion

This study sought to provide viable opportunities for teachers to engage in topics beyond traditional Eurocentrism. The collation of information to create appropriate and accessible resources for students was the primary focus, including historiography pitched directly with Year 12 students in mind. Engagement with primary and secondary sources as well as interviews and workshops with various scholars, enabled me to achieve this. In particular, students will be able to understand the alignment between social, political, economic and religious issues, rather than viewing Iranian history as a primarily religious revolution. Even so, studying Iran will require passion and dedication on the part of the teacher, but it is hoped that this study will equip educators with the confidence to embrace Iran, whether in Stage 6 Modern History or as a unit in Elective History.

The Year 12 National Study for Iran satisfies the criteria for a non-western unit of study, but there are elements within that can be extracted for stand-alone Case Studies in Year 11 Modern History and Elective History. The beauty of this topic is that there are countless opportunities for students to pursue a guided inquiry into an area of interest, with conflicting perspectives and opinions readily available. Students can learn to critique sources, considering their historical context, drawing conclusions on the value and limitations for historians.

My learning will be shared through HTA Webinars in September 2020, with COVID-19 restrictions limiting the possibility of presenting at conferences this year. I plan on continuing to share my learning in 2021 and beyond, disseminating a teaching program for the National Study, and potentially some Case Studies for Year 11 Modern History or Elective History. Furthermore, I am working on compiling a list of sources and resources that can be used by teachers to support classroom activities such as source analysis, as well as sharing a detailed bibliography. There is a small, yet keen, group of teachers teaching Iran who have formed a Facebook group, and in addition to distribution through the HTA, these resources will be made available there. Should the chance arise, I would value the opportunity to develop this material into a textbook chapter or Study Guide to assist both teachers and students in Year 12. Overall, the gift of this scholarship has enhanced my pedagogical approach, not only in relation to Iran, and I will seek to ensure the investment in me continues to serve others.

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