The Fall of Heaven: The Pahlavis and the Final Days of Imperial Iran

Andrew Scott Cooper (Henry Holt and Company, 2016), 587 pp., index.

Reviewed by Brent G.

A common pitfall in writing revisionist history is the tendency of authors who set out on such endeavors to realize—at least on some levels—that the orthodox interpretation of historical events or leaders had much going for it. Such is the case with *The Fall of Heaven*, Andrew Scott Cooper's biography of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, the last king of Iran. The title says a lot about what the author probably intended to write, but also about what the book becomes in the end. Cooper wants his readers to reconsider the Shah and the prevailing image of him as a cowardly, prevaricating despot who squelched democracy, squandered Iran's enormous oil wealth, and ruled with—to mix metaphors—an iron fist, disguised in a velvet glove. At the outset, in fact, Cooper boldly declares that the Shah has been misunderstood and that his rule marked a golden era of Iranian history. By the time he is finished, however, Cooper shows more balance, and focuses on telling a compelling story about how the Shah's family managed the end of its dynasty and, in the process, makes a noteworthy contribution to the literature on the Iranian Revolution.

Some of the praises Cooper showers on Pahlavi in the opening chapter are excessive and would appear to even the informed generalist as transparently questionable and probably unsubstantiated. Take, for instance, his claims that the Shah "outmaneuvered ruthless and wily American presidents" such as Eisenhower, Johnson, and Nixon, or that he "steered Iran through the treacherous currents of World War II." (13–14) In the former example, most American presidents viewed the Shah, when considering him at all, as a necessary ally against Soviet encroachment in the Middle East and resigned themselves to working with him in spite of his weak character and grating pomposity. In the latter example, the Shah was 21 years old when the British army placed him on the throne following its 1941 invasion and occupation of Iran—with American and Soviet forces—for the remainder of the war. Pahlavi no more "steered" Iran during World War II than did his father, Reza Shah, from British-imposed exile in South Africa, where he died in 1944. From his endnotes, it is clear that Cooper relied heavily on interviews with the Shah's widow, Shahbanou Farah Pahlavi, the Shah's children, and former members of the deposed royal court—and parts of his opening chapter read like a panegyric he might have drafted to convince them to lend him their time and memories.

Cooper struggles almost from the outset with the evidence before him. If he intended to reevaluate the Shah, too often he is confronted with anecdotes and illustrations that point to the Shah's being who we thought he was. Cooper, to his credit, does not try to explain them all away and tries—more often than not—to paint a nuanced picture of Pahlavi, drawn from an impressive array of interviews with those who knew him and a smattering of secondary sources. However, in several cases, Cooper fails to give sufficient weight to evidence that suggests his efforts to rehabilitate the Shah's image are in vain. For example, Cooper describes how the Shah adored his teenage daughter but grew to neglect her because his second wife did not care for her. (68–69) He pointed out that this decision would haunt the Shah when his daughter later turned on him publicly, but Cooper fails to mention how this reflected the Shah's own personal weakness. In another instance, Cooper recounts an interview the Shah gave during a trip to the United States in which he declared, "this king business has personally given me nothing but headaches" (35)–comments Cooper calls "maudlin and self-pitying" (100) but implies were the exception rather than the rule. The problem, however, is that Cooper provides the reader sufficient evidence to argue that the opposite was more likely the case.

The Fall of Heaven is not without its merits. Cooper convincingly argues that Queen Farah probably deserves more credit than contemporary observers gave her, and he draws a flattering portrait of her as a frustrated reformer. He highlights her efforts to tone down the over-the-top, weeks-long celebration of what the Shah called 2,500 years of Persian monarchy at the site of the ancient city of Persepolis in 1971, as well as corruption within the

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royal family and its court. Likewise, he credits Farah for promoting women's issues and education for girls, as well as promoting the arts and public health. Also, Cooper's almost day-to-day account of the last few months of the Pahlavi rule and the Shah's mismanagement illustrates how a crisis so unthinkable to outside observers—including the CIA and the State Department, until the damage was largely done—could unfold over a relatively short period of time.

Perhaps the most novel aspect of Cooper's account is his discussion of the revered Iranian-Lebanese cleric, Musa Sadr, whom Cooper argues was a closet supporter of the Shah and was prepared to return to Iran from Lebanon in 1978 to stand with the king in a call for national unity before disappearing during a trip to Libya. Many theories exist about Sadr's disappearance; he was never seen again, but Cooper lays his death at the feet of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and his revolutionaries. This story is interesting and shines a light on the Shah's efforts to find a clerical counterweight to Khomeini, but no evidence indicates that Sadr could have successfully challenged the exiled Ayatollah by that late stage.

Another aspect of this book that bears further examination—even if Cooper's conclusions do not always hold up—are points of evidence that suggest the Shah's regime was less repressive than is commonly believed. For example, Cooper highlights the research of former seminarian and Islamic Republic bureaucrat Emad al-Din Baghi, who led the post-revolutionary investigation into the Shah's crimes. In short, Baghi found that the number of those the Shah ordered killed or imprisoned for political crimes was far smaller than what the mullahs and other political opponents had claimed. Where Khomeini had accused the Shah of killing over 100,000 people during his rule, Baghi could only find fewer than 4,000, a number that included 2,781 fatalities during the 1978–79 revolution. Those numbers pale in comparison to the 12,000 who are believed to have been killed by the Islamic Republic during Khomeini's decade in power from 1979 to 1989, including an estimated 3,000 political prisoners in one week in July 1988.

Cooper is not the first to cite Baghi's data to a Western audience, but he uses that information to argue convincingly that the Shah's repression was no worse than that of contemporary despots such as Chile's Augusto Pinochet, and that his was milder, certainly, than Iraq's Saddam Hussein or Syria's Hafez al-Asad. What he fails most importantly to do, however, is to put that repression into the proper context of the Iranian people and their leaders. With the exception of only a very few members of the royal court and family, Cooper points out that the Shah shared power with practically no one by the mid-1970s. (152) In 1975, the Shah abolished Iran's two nominal political parties and established the Rastakhiz (Resurgence) Party, commonly referred to as the "King's Party." As Cooper points out, the Iranian people interpreted this as "a final, brazen attempt to bury their cherished 1906 Constitution." (217) In the end, the Shah had few true loyalists who would stand and fight for him against Khomeini and his followers, and he had only himself to blame.

The Fall of Heaven falls short of the best biography of the last king of Iran—Abbas Milani's *The Shah* (St. Martin's Press, 2012)—but it is more nuanced and balanced than most other Shah biographies to date. At the very least, its careful examination of Queen Farah, detailed account of the royal family's last days in power, and reconsideration of the true level of Shah-era repression should prove useful to students of Iranian history and politics, political psychologists, and leadership and political analysts writ large.

Thus the book will also inform those who have absorbed literature addressing intelligence in the period 1954–79, including books such as Columbia scholar Robert Jervis' *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War.* The work, published in 2010, is partly based on Jervis' classified research—since declassified—into CIA analysis before the Shah's fall.[a, b]

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a. See Torrey Froescher's review in *Studies in Intelligence* 54, No. 3 (September 2010).

b. As this issue was being prepared, the State Department released about 1000 pages of declassified documents concerning TPAJAX. It is available in State's digital Foreign Relations of the United States collection.