

# Central Asian Survey

Volume 16, No. 4, December 1997

**The Iranian Constitutional Revolution, 1906–1911: Grassroots Democracy, Social Democracy and the Origins of Feminism**

Janet Afary

New York: Columbia University Press, 1996. xxi + 448 pp., bibliography, glossary, index

Since the Iranian revolution of 1978–79, terror and censorship within Iran have somehow extended themselves to the outside world and have acquired the akhund such legitimacy that for a long time it seemed only Islam would sell like hot cake. After studies of Islam during the Iranian Constitutional Revolution by worthy scholars such as Vanessa Martin and Mangol Bayat, it is with much courage and conviction that Janet Afary attends to the more humane and

progressive currents in Iranian history and unravels the numerous intricacies of a major happening. Here she unearths the identity and activities of religious dissidents, radical peasants, social democrats, women and others.

Janet Afary has produced a comprehensive history of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution. While the work is highly original it serves as an excellent textbook for teaching the history of that event. The research for the book is also comprehensive. The author has based her work not only on Persian, English and French sources—her patient reading of the rare newspapers of the Constitutional period is impressive. Before chronicling the history of that revolution, the book gives an account of the development of the Iranian economy and the rise of the young Iranian bourgeoisie. Also examined is the wild spectrum of religious and secular ideologies which combined to form the backbone of the revolution.

Furthermore; the book contains three important appendices on peasant rebellions, the question of women, and radical journalism during the Constitutional Revolution. The first of these, on the peasants, must be the most controversial. The author provides a response to the 1978 thesis of Ervand Abrahamian and Farhad Kazemi that the Iranian peasantry, with the exception of those in the Caspian region, were 'non-revolutionary'. The peasant rebellions of the time took place in fragments, and of all the fragments Afary chooses the most radical and popular which materialized in the northern province of Gilan. Indeed information about the other pockets of peasant resistance is scarce and this has led to the belief that there were major obstacles before the constitution of the Iranian peasantry as a class.

Afary deals with the Gilani chapter in detail and shows how the conservative Iranian parliament reacted with legislation and force to suppress the peasant councils. While she is aware of the limitations of peasant rebellions and shows brilliantly how the peasants' radical leaders let them down, she does not deal with the degree of peasant consciousness which was indeed limited. A decade later the same peasants began an even more radical rebellion but soon liberal reform satisfied them.

Janet Afary repeatedly attends to one of the most important problems that has plagued Iranian history—the alliance of the religious and the radical. This alliance at times found different shapes: between purely nationalist elements and revolutionaries; or even between outright reactionaries and Social-Democrats. During the Constitutional Revolution secular radicals allied themselves with those discontented akhunds who had limited interest in restricting the powers of the Iranian Shah. Sometimes even this alliance materialized within political organizations and movements. As one reads to the end of Afary's story, one wonders if the radicals could have ever challenged the powers of the Iranian elite and the clergy. And indeed what would have happened if they had.

A decade after the Constitutional Revolution, the national struggle having intensified, the Gilani radicals of the Caspian region formed an anti-imperialist front with the involvement of akhunds. At times they recruited members of the elite and on the whole adopted the tactics of the Constitutionalist radicals. That

BOOK REVIEWS

front, known as the Jangali movement, finally rid itself of the akhund and the elite. As the continuation of the Constitutionalists' struggle, it could have lessons for historians of Iran.

But the elite had the support of British and especially Russian imperialisms. Afary closes the last chapter by describing how those factors finally came to suppress the constitutional order of Iran. It was not surprising that the Iranian movement, once it got the chance to flare up again, found a prominently national character. It was precisely instances of imperialist intervention like that which have today inflicted upon the Iranian, nation and state the disease of nationalism. The problem has become so intense that it renders anti-imperialism no longer an absolute value. Iranian nationalism has now become central to the ideology of oppression and however historically legitimate, is no longer desirable.

On the question of women and the origins of their yet unfulfilled emancipation, Afary is more realistic. The relevant chapter describes how women organized themselves and even published journals mostly in the context of the activities of male constitutionalists but also for their own limited emancipation. The little that they achieved is seen as positive and praiseworthy by the author.

The most original chapter of the book must be the one on radical journalism during the revolution. Afary argues that the progressive newspapers of the time challenged the political, economic and cultural institutions of the country and fostered the aspirations of many new social groups for a more egalitarian society, including those who had just begun to gain their voices, such as women and the peasantry.

One of the greatest achievements of Janet Afary in her solid scholarship of high calibre is her revelation of the true identity of those who made the Revolution. At the end of her study she asks how it was that under the reign of subsequent regimes in Iran a historical narrative was constructed in which the multicultural and the multi-ideological aspects of the Constitutional Revolution, in addition to its more radical dimensions, were edited out!

*Pezhmann Dailami*

**Kochevaia tsivilizatsiia kazakhov: osnovy zhiznedeiatel'nosti nomadnogo obshchestva**

Nurbulat Masanov

Almaty: Sotsinvest, 1995

During the Soviet period, the lens typically used to examine Kazak history was based on the feudal pattern of medieval Europe as interpreted by Soviet historiography. Among its shortcomings, this perspective failed adequately to distinguish the pre-Soviet development of nomadic societies from that of sedentary societies, instead homogenizing them both as 'feudal'. Masanov seeks to remove nomadism from the margins of analysis and place it squarely at its