
TEXT AND ITS CULTURAL INTERPRETATION

A. Wynn

THE *SHĀH-NĀME* AND BRITISH PROPAGANDA IN IRĀN IN WORLD WAR II

During World War II Irān, although nominally neutral, played an important part in the Allied effort against Nazi Germany. In order to provide a route for delivering military supplies to the Soviet Union, in 1941 British forces occupied the south of Irān, while the Soviets occupied the north. Although there was a serious shortage of vessels, a stream of ships delivered goods to the port of Khorramshahr, at the head of the Persian Gulf, for onward delivery by the new railway, completed in 1939, to Bandar Pahlavī on the Caspian. This supply line was known as the Persian Corridor.

As in World War I, much of Iranian public opinion was on the German side, in the hope that Germany would relieve Irān from both the long British and the Russian domination of their country. In the early part of the war, not surprisingly, many Iranians were convinced that Germany would prevail. As part of the effort to persuade Iranians to take the Allied side, the psychological warfare office in London turned to the Persian scholar Dr (later Professor) Arthur Arberry of Cambridge University, with a view to designing propaganda posters. Arberry, in turn, sought the advice of Mojtabā Mīnovī, who was at the time working for the BBC Persian service and editing a pro-Allied newspaper *Ruzgār-e Nāw*. Mīnovī persuaded the authorities that, rather than the usual flamboyant “victory” posters, it would be more persuasive to use an adaptation of the *Shāh-nāme*. His point was that it would be far more effective to appeal to Persian nationalist pride than to attempt to inspire a pro-Allied feeling with western images. In a letter to Arberry he wrote that the Persians were a subtle race, used to indirect communication, who for centuries had been accustomed to putting new interpretations to ancient and familiar quotations [1].

Mīnovī's advice was to take the story of the tyrant *Zahhāk* and *Kāve*, the blacksmith liberator. Not only was this story taught in school but at that time almost every town in Irān had tea houses where it was recited, along

with other stories of the *Shāh-nāme*, by professional *naqqāls*. Every Persian, whether literate or not, was familiar with the principal stories of the epic.

In the *Shāh-nāme* *Zahhāk* presents himself as a saviour of the Iranian nation, which had been suffering under the rule of the arrogant *Jamshīd*. *Zahhāk* is then turned by Satan into a monster, with a pair of snakes sprouting from his shoulders, which have to be fed daily on human brains. *Zahhāk*, to Persian nationalists of the eleventh century, represented the Arabs, who had invaded and destroyed their ancient civilisation. Mīnovī's idea was to create a contemporary version of *Zahhāk*, portraying him as Hitler. The two snakes would represent Mussolini and Tojo, the Japanese commander-in-chief and prime minister, while the devil, who inspires *Zahhāk*, and is disguised as a cook in the *Shāh-nāme*, was to be portrayed as Goebbels. The parallels were obvious.

The person chosen to create the posters was Kimon Evan Marengo, known as Kem, a Greek-Egyptian political cartoonist who, during the war, produced over 3,000 propaganda cartoons for the British Ministry of Information. Kem prepared the six posters between March and October 1942. One can imagine that they were distributed around the bazaars and to the tea houses where people gathered. To coincide with the Tehrān Conference, held at the end of November 1943, the posters were reprinted as a booklet of postcards. At the conference, Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin, aside from other matters, signed a Declaration on Irān that committed the three powers to Irān's independence.

The first card (*plate 1*) shows *Iblīs*, the devil, disguised as a cook but with the face of Goebbels, in front of *Zahhāk*, who has the face of Hitler. The two snakes sprouting from his shoulder have the faces of Mussolini and Tojo, the Japanese commander-in-chief. The onlookers are all wearing swastikas on their sleeves. The *Shāh-nāme* verses read: