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The Army of Nader Shah

This article looks at the origins of the army of Nader Shah (reigned 1736–1747) and the nature of the Persian armies in the Safavid period before considering in more detail the composition and structure of the army at its peak in the early 1740s. It suggests, building on work by Rudi Matthee, that it was only under Nader's tutelage that Persia fully embraced gunpowder weapons and that this initiated a Military Revolution (not just a revolution in technology, but in drill, discipline, and army size as well as ethos) that, but for Nader's untimely death, could have brought about the wider social and economic changes that Geoffrey Parker and others have associated with the Military Revolution in Europe.

In the spring of 1743, the 375,000 strong Persian army of Nader Shah stood poised to invade Ottoman Iraq. It was the first in Persian history to be comprehensively equipped with up-to-date gunpowder weapons, for both cavalry and infantry, and included a powerful new artillery train of nearly 350 cannon and siege mortars, which would shortly be employed against the cities of Kirkuk and Mosul. This large army was disciplined, well-motivated, well-supplied, regularly paid and fed, and included veterans of Nader's successful campaigns in India and Central Asia. It had beaten the Ottomans before and would do so again. It is no exaggeration to say that at this date, it was not only the most powerful single force in Asia but possibly in the world. Its creation and maintenance had begun processes that could, in time, have brought about great and lasting changes in Persia. But because Nader himself was dead within four years, these changes did not happen, and the military history of his reign has been relatively little studied.¹

In a recent article,² Rudi Matthee examined the geographic, economic and cultural factors that influenced the conduct of warfare in Persia in the Safavid period,

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¹The need for a specialised study of Nader Shah's army was noted in V.J. Parry and M.E. Yapp, *War, Technology and Society in the Middle East* (London/Oxford, 1975), 24. The need was partly met by Perry's article (J.R. Perry "Army IV—Afshar and Zand" in *Encyclopaedia Iranica* 2: 506–508), but new source material has become available since that time.

²Rudi Matthee, "Unwalled Cities and Restless Nomads: Firearms and Artillery in Safavid Iran" in *Safavid Persia: The History and Politics of an Islamic Society*, ed. Charles Melville (London, 1996).

preceding Nader's rise to power and the Afghan revolts of the early eighteenth century. His judgment was that the term Gunpowder Empire (first presented as a generic term for the Ottoman, Moghul and Safavid states by Marshall G. Hodgson³) was misleading for the Safavid regime, because the Safavids' use of gunpowder weapons never developed beyond a relatively limited level. This was because (among other factors) the great distances and difficult terrain of Iran made the transport of heavy artillery almost impossible and because traditions of mounted warfare resisted the adoption of firearms that were awkward to handle on horseback and were perceived as unmanly. After the treaty of Zohab in 1639, when long wars between the Safavids and Ottomans came to an end, there was an extended period of peace in the west. Shah Abbas II retook Kandahar from the Moghuls in 1648 with the help of siege artillery⁴ and further remodeled the army; but after his reign, there was peace in the east too, and there appeared to be no pressing need to compete with the military development of neighboring states. The strong natural barriers that fortified the margins of the Safavid Empire lent an added sense of false security.

In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, under Shah Abbas the Great, the Safavid regime had established substantial corps of musketeers and artillery, but when the state mobilized for war, these were usually outnumbered by hosts of mounted warriors armed with lances, swords, and bows supplied from the nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes of the regions. Many of the Shah's household troops continued to be equipped with the same traditional weapons, eschewing the carbines and pistols taken up by European cavalry in the same period. In the structure of the armies of the most military-minded Safavid Shahs, there were already some pointers to the achievements of Nader's period, albeit on a smaller scale. The 12,000 strong *tofangchi* (musketeer) corps was mounted on horses, and Shah Abbas I may have converted a number of the *qurci* troops (recruited from the tribal cavalry) and all the *qullar* or ghulams to become mounted musketeers too. Nader was to make extensive use of mounted firearm infantry, particularly on his campaign in India. In 1654, Shah Abbas II raised a force of 600 guards armed with the heavy caliber *jazyer* musket—a weapon that was to feature importantly in Nader's campaigns.⁵

After 1639, the musketeer corps was maintained, at least in some form, but the artillery corps probably faded out of existence altogether after the reign of

See also Rohan D'souza, "Crisis before the Fall: Some Speculations on the Decline of the Ottomans, Safavids and Mughals," *Social Scientist* 30 (Sep. 2002): 18–19 (though I have some reservations about the wider argument there). For the Safavid army generally, see V. Minorsky, ed. and trans., *Tadbkirat al-Muluk* (Cambridge, 1943), 30–36 and Haneda "Army III—Safavid" in *Encyclopaedia Iranica* 2:503–506.

³Hodgson, Marshall G.S. *The Venture of Islam 3: The Gunpowder Empires and Modern Times* (Chicago, 1974).

⁴Paul Luft, *Iran unter Schah 'Abbas II. (1642–1666)*, PhD dissertation, Goettingen, 1968, 35–36.

⁵V. Minorsky, ed. and trans., *Tadbkirat al-Muluk* (Cambridge, 1943), 32–34.

Abbas II.⁶ As the century drew to a close, a period of weak central authority meant that Persia was generally ill-prepared for the troubles that descended on the monarchy early in the next century. The argument qualifying the status of the Safavid regime as a Gunpowder Empire is relative, not absolute. It does not suggest that the Safavids failed to adopt firearms nor that they failed to cast cannon for siege warfare. They did both. But there was no wholesale changeover to gunpowder weapons or thorough-going revision of previous patterns of warfare to adapt to them as there was in Europe or in the Ottoman Empire (or as came in Persia later, under Nader Shah). Rather, the previous traditions of warfare adapted to gunpowder weapons and continued. Perhaps most significantly, there was no “technicalization” (Marshall G Hodgson’s term) of siege warfare and no hugely expensive refortification of strategic towns and cities to adapt to the changed conditions of siege warfare with cannon. Iran’s Military Revolution remained half-finished. Military developments buttressed the absolutism of Shah Abbas I and his successors, but their armies remained largely pre-modern in weaponry and force structure, and failed to effect a further, more profound, transformation in political and social arrangements, as happened elsewhere.⁷

Nonetheless, the defeat of the Safavid armed forces that brought about the collapse of the Safavid State in 1722 was not the result of military backwardness. The Afghan victors at Golnabad in 1722 were no more advanced in military development than their Safavid opponents, but their command was more integrated and better motivated. The Safavid army at Golnabad was large and well-equipped,⁸ and the troops fought hard. They could have beaten the Afghans, and several contemporaries believed that they nearly did. The weakness that caused the defeat was poor leadership and coordination at the top, and this is not the place to assess the separate causes for that.

Nader Shah emerged out of the anarchy that followed the collapse of the Safavid regime. He attached himself in 1726 to the cause of Tahmasp, the son of the Safavid Shah deposed by the Afghans in 1722. But having defeated the Afghans, he deposed Tahmasp in 1732 and finally took the throne of Persia himself in 1736. In the process, he restored all the old borders of Persia in a series of brilliant campaigns, defeating the Ottomans in the west as well as the Afghans in the east, and securing the withdrawal of the Russians in the north by negotiation and an anti-Ottoman alliance.

The instrument that enabled him to achieve this was a new army, incorporating elements familiar from the Safavid period but operating on new principles.

⁶V. Minorsky, trans. and ed., *Tadbkirat al-Muluk* (Cambridge, 1943), 33 asserted that the artillery commander died in 1655 and Abbas II abolished the artillery corps altogether. Luft showed that the artillery corps in some form probably survived until the reign of Shah Soleiman (1666–1694); Luft, *Iran unter Schah 'Abbas II*, 36–38.

⁷Rudi Matthee, “Unwalled Cities and Restless Nomads: Firearms and Artillery in Safavid Iran,” in *Safavid Persia: The History and Politics of an Islamic Society*, ed. Charles Melville (London, 1996), 410.

⁸The artillery corps had been re-established, though the part it played in the battle was less than glorious (Axworthy, *The Sword of Persia*, 48–49).

My argument is that this set in train in Iran the beginnings of what has been called the Military Revolution in Europe. In his early years, Nader had served the Safavid monarchy on the northeastern frontier of Khorasan as a musketeer (tofangchi), intercepting and pursuing fast-moving Turkmen raiders and slavers. Whereas firearms were coming into use by ordinary Lezge tribesmen by the 1720s on the northwestern frontier of Persia in the Caucasus, Mirza Mahdi Astarabadi's chronicle says that the mounted tribesmen of the northeast were more backward in that respect, still relying on lances and sabres.⁹ This would have given Nader and his companions, armed with muskets, a local advantage. Nader learned important lessons in those years about the nature of tribal warfare and the importance of combining mobility and firepower.

By the time Nader joined forces with Tahmasp in 1726, important elements of his military system were already in place, despite the fact that the forces under his command were still relatively small. He was not yet able to arm his cavalry with firearms, but there were substantial numbers of infantry musketeers, and the whole force exercised with their weapons for several hours each day. The musketeers fired repeatedly at targets to improve their marksmanship and the speed of their reloading, and Nader attended in person, keeping a close eye on the officers and men, ready to promote any that showed particular aptitude. All this is evident from the eyewitness account of the Greek traveler, Basile Vatatzes, who concluded:

...the infantry—I mean those that carried muskets—would get together in their own units and they would shoot their guns at a target and exercise continuously. If Takmaz Kuli Khan saw an ordinary soldier consistently on top form he would promote him to be a leader of 100 men or a leader of 50 men. He encouraged all the soldiers toward bravery, ability and experience, and in simple words he himself gave an example of strong character and military virtue.¹⁰

This account is important, because although others refer to ‘constant strict drills,’¹¹ it is the only one to show in detail how Nader exercised his troops. It shows too that intensive drill was an important element in his military method from the earliest stage in his career.

⁹For the Lezges, see the “Lettre du Pere Bachoud, Missionnaire de la Compagnie de Jesus en Perse, Ecrite de Chamakie le 25 Septembre 1721” in *Lettres Edifiantes et Curieuses Ecrites des Missions Etrangères* (Paris, 1780) 4: 118; for the Afshars and Kurds of Khorasan, see Mirza Mohammad Mahdi Astarabadi, *Jabangosha-ye Naderi*; translated into French by Sir William Jones as the *Histoire de Nader Chah* (London, 1770) (JN); (original Persian text, ed. Abdollah Anvar, [Tehran, 1377 / 1998]), 1: 12. The Lezges, close to the Ottoman frontier, would have been influenced by the greater emphasis on firearms in the Ottoman military system.

¹⁰Basile Vatatzes, *Persica: Histoire de Chah-Nadir*, ed. N. Iorga (Bucharest, 1939), 133. The importance of this early biography of Nader, which for many years was thought to have been lost, is explored in my article “Basile Vatatzes and His History of Nader Shah” in *Oriente Moderno* 2 (2006), 331–343.

¹¹See, for example, Abraham of Crete, *The Chronicle of Abraham of Crete* (CAC), ed. and trans., G.A. Bournoutian (Costa Mesa, 1999), 118.

Abraham of Crete described Nader's cavalry in 1736:

Many of the soldiers wear armour. Some had woven armour [ie chain mail]; others two metal plates, one on the chest and one on the back; others had four metal plates [on chest, back] and under the arms, one on the right and one on the left. They also have large guns . . . and large powder flasks, each one houses one and a half okka of powder and even more. Each one hangs two powder flasks on his back. If necessary they can gallop all day over plains and canyons, clamber and descend over rocky mountain slopes, like a partridge. They do not know tiredness, they never grumble, and sometimes they break stones to make a path between the rocks. They dig the earth and the snow, and acting as if they had not laboured at all, they meet the enemy bravely, give battle, and are victorious.¹²

This is not the place to give an exhaustive account of Nader's campaigns in Ottoman Iraq, India, Central Asia, and the Caucasus, or a chronology of his reign. Instead, I propose to give a snapshot of the army at its peak, in the early 1740s, and then to discuss a series of significant aspects of its composition and character. Then I will conclude with some observations about the significance of the army for the country as a whole.

An account from one of Nader's army pay clerks (contained within the *Alam-Ara-ye Naderi* of Mohammad Kazem Marvi Yazdi¹³) gives the numbers of troops under his command at the beginning of the campaign of 1743, divided up by the regions they originated from. The army had expanded massively since 1729, when Nader had defeated the Afghans with a force of around 25,000.¹⁴ The total drawn up by the pay clerk in 1743 came to a huge 375,000 men, of whom only a minority were Shi'a Persians. They included 60,000 Turkmen and Uzbeks; 70,000 Afghans and Indians; 65,000 troops from

¹²Abraham of Crete, *The Chronicle of Abraham of Crete*, 118. It is evident from the description of their armor that Abraham of Crete was primarily describing Nader's heavy cavalry here (for the light cavalry, see note 17 below). The description fits the soldiers in the images painted in the 1750s to accompany an early text of Mirza Mahdi Astarabadi's *Jabangosha-ye Naderi*—published with an edition of that text by Soroush and Negar in Tehran in 1991 with an introduction by Abdolali Adib Barumand.

¹³Mohammad Kazem Marvi Yazdi, *Alam Ara-ye Naderi*, 3rd ed., ed. Mohammad Amin Riyahi (Tehran, 1374/1995), 887–888.

¹⁴In the intervening years, the army grew, fluctuating according to the flow of recruits, the necessities of garrisoning and the special requirements of particular campaigns; 100,000 fighting troops by 1733 (Abraham of Crete, *The Chronicle of Abraham of Crete*, 118, estimated between 120,000 and 180,000 in 1736); 150,000 by 1741. The campaign of 1743 represented a supreme effort, but the 375,000 total is plausible. Other sources give the main field army in the campaign of 1743 as 200,000 strong, which given the number of detachments sent to occupy the other towns of Ottoman Iraq, fits the overall total (for example, von Hammer, *Geschichte des Osmanischen Reiches* (Pest, 1831) 8:47 '...ein Heer von hunderttausend Persern, von eben so vielen Kurden und Arabern verstaerkt . . .'). See also note 18 below.

Khorasan; 120,000 from western Persia (Kurdestan, Hamadan, Lorestan, Bakhtaran, Fars, and Khuzestan); and 60,000 from Azerbaijan and the Caucasus. Some have doubted this total, speculating that it included some servants or camp-followers, but other authorities say the soldiers had to pay their servants at their own expense,¹⁵ which would suggest that most (if not all) of this huge number, recorded for the purpose of keeping track of the soldiers' pay, were fighting troops. The total does not include the large numbers of soldiers in provincial garrisons, and Nader's conduct of the invasion of Ottoman Iraq that followed suggests that many of them were light cavalry¹⁶ recruited from the tribes of Iran, who swarmed forward to take control of the countryside and smaller towns.¹⁷ To put the size of this force in a contemporary context, it was larger than the armies of Austria and Prussia (the main protagonists in the central theater of the Seven Years' War that began in Europe in the following decade) put together.¹⁸

The account of Jonas Hanway, who visited Nader's camp a year later in the spring of 1744, gives a clearer idea of the equipment and structural balance of the field army that was the core of this larger force. He says that there were 200,000 altogether, but admits that his breakdown of their numbers does not add up to this total and that he had omitted some of the soldiers (for example, he does not include the artillery troops, or important tribes like the Bakhtiari or Qajars). There were 13,000 guard cavalry, 20,000 cavalry from Nader's own Afshar tribe, 50,000 Afghan cavalry, 12,000 jazayerchis and 40,000 ordinary musketeers. There were also 18,000 Turkmen, Uzbeks, and Baluchis, who served as light troops.¹⁹

Hanway said that most of the soldiers were armed with muskets and sabers; but the Uzbeks, for example, might have only lances, bows, or pistols, and sabers.

¹⁵Jonas Hanway, *An Historical Account of the British Trade Over the Caspian Sea... to which are added The Revolutions of Persia during the Present Century, with the Particular History of the Great Usurper Nadir Kouli* (London 1753), 1: 253

¹⁶The light cavalry were described by a Frenchman (De Voulton) who called them *loutchis* (probably misheard for the Persian *luti*, signifying a young, unruly youth). He saw them in India three years earlier: they wore the four-cornered hat, the *kulab-e Naderi*, eighteen inches high, with a goat-skin or sheepskin wound round it; a woollen cloak on their shoulders; an open shirt that left the chest bare; short breeches; and leather boots. Each of them was armed with a sword, a musket, and an axe. The description is quoted in S Subrahmanyam, "Un Grand Derangement: Dreaming an Indo-Persian Empire in South Asia, 1740–1800," *Journal of Early Modern History* (Leiden, 2000): 4: 358 and Laurence Lockhart's article "De Voulton's Noticia," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies* 4 (February 1926): 234; and also appears in the letter of Père Saignes—"Lettre du Père Saignes de Chandernagore, 10 Fevrier 1740" in *Lettres Edifiantes et Curieuses Ecrites des Missions Etrangères* (Paris, 1780), 4: 230–277 which seems to derive from the same source. Saignes' version gives the horsemen a shield in addition, and says their coats were green, yellow or red.

¹⁷Robert W. Olson, *The Siege of Mosul and Ottoman-Persian Relations 1718–1743* (Bloomington, 1975), 122–124 and 165 (quoting Ottoman sources) shows how the army of 375,000 was divided up into subordinate or smaller corps for the campaign that followed.

¹⁸Christopher Duffy, *The Army of Frederick the Great* (Newton Abbot, 1974), 165. The Austrian army was 177,500 strong in 1756; the Prussian, 143,000 strong.

¹⁹Hanway, *An Historical Account of the British Trade*, 1: 251–3.

He implied that most of the muskets were flintlocks or similar miquelet-locks and that some of the muskets were matchlocks. The Afghans may also have been without firearms, to some extent, but Nader's use of them as shock cavalry, and the fact that they were armed with lances, suggests that they were not expected to need them. Hanway makes a point of saying that the Afghans were very brave and that the guard troops were 'the genteelst of the soldiery.' He says Nader shaped the corps of jazayerchis carefully himself: they were well-clothed and carried big, heavy caliber muskets.²⁰ Hanway described the jazayerchis as foot-soldiers, but we know from Nader's campaign in India that they often served as mounted infantry and even fought on horseback on occasion. Nader used them as a trustworthy body of hard-fighting troops, who could be relied upon for specially difficult or crucial tasks, and often commanded them personally.

Neither Mohammad Kazem nor Hanway mentions the artillery in these lists, but we know from other sources that Nader had a corps of at least 500 or 700 *zanburak* camel guns.²¹ These were light cannon, firing a ball of one or two pounds' weight, carried on the backs of camels. They were particularly useful because they could go almost anywhere a mounted horseman could go: important in a country of rugged terrain and few roads. By the early 1740s Nader had also created two powerful forces of siege artillery: one based on Kermanshah in the west, and the other stored at Merv in the north-east. On the campaign in Ottoman Iraq in 1743 Nader took with him (though they marched separately from the main army) a new siege train of 116 heavy cannons and 230 mortars, the latter for bombarding the interior of cities under siege.²² Contemporary illustrations show his troops using wheeled field artillery in battle,²³ and their use is confirmed in the written sources, notably by Abraham of Crete in his description of the first battle of Baghavard in 1735.²⁴

²⁰The best description of these troops comes from the account by Abraham of Crete's account of Nader's coronation in 1736—"They held their very large firearms in their hands. Each of the guns weighed more than fifteen okka. They held their arms with the barrels pointing upwards. Half of each barrel was decorated with golden rings, the other half with silver rings. They leaned on the guns as if they were rods. On their heads they wore felt hats. . . [on which] there were the words Allah-yallah written in three ways." (CAC, 78) The weight of the weapons would come on this basis (an *okka* was equivalent to 2.83lb) to about 19.25 kg (42.5 lb). A comparable eighteenth-century weapon from Persia in the Bern Historical Museum (Moser collection) weighs 27.5 kg (see Axworthy, *The Sword of Persia*, 210 for illustration). This is heavy for an infantry weapon, but feasible if the jazayerchis were mounted on ponies or mules for strategic movement. Hanway and the VOC sources corroborate the use of very heavy muskets.

²¹For example, *The Chronicle of Abraham of Crete*, 39.

²²Von Hammer 1831, 8: 48. Lockhart seems to have mistaken '*hundert sechzebn*' for '*hundert sechs-zig*' because he gives the number of cannons as 160 (L. Lockhart, *Nadir Shah* [London, 1938], 230).

²³See Barumand's edition of Astarabadi's *Jahangosha-ye Naderi*, 96, 322.

²⁴See *The Chronicle of Abraham of Crete*, 39 where the chronicler makes a clear distinction between Nader's field artillery and his zanburaks, saying also that the Persians fired their cannon more rapidly than the Ottomans. Vatatzes' account of the second battle of Baghavard, a decade later, says that the Persian artillery outclassed the Ottoman there too (Vatatzes, *Persica*, 283–284).

When it comes to the army's strengths and weaknesses, it is evident from the accounts of Nader's campaigns that the Persians' difficulties with siege warfare were still intractable, having more to do with the difficult geography of the country than technological backwardness. Nader's usual method of siege warfare was to draw the garrison out to fight in the open field or to blockade and starve them out. Only by 1743 did he have the wherewithal for serious siege warfare and, by then, his will for conquest was fading. Nader's early successes in battle against the Afghans were achieved mainly through firepower, but against the Ottomans, his successes were mostly due to greater tactical flexibility. The Persian cavalry seem to have been generally superior to the Ottoman,²⁵ and his Afghan cavalry were probably the finest shock cavalry in the region. The Ottoman janissaries of the standing force based in Istanbul, who were sent east against Nader several times in his career, were a tougher proposition but were often unenthusiastic and mutinous.

Nader placed great emphasis on leadership, initiative, the swift transmission of orders, and the rapid reporting of intelligence from reconnaissance. Honest mistakes were forgiven, but punishment for neglect of his orders was severe. Many of his victories were achieved because scouting gave him knowledge of a weakness on the enemy's side, and rapid movement enabled him to take them by surprise. He always preferred to reduce the odds against his troops by a stratagem before battle or as the battle commenced, rather than march straight into a frontal assault. Examples include the first battle of Baghavard in 1735, where he led a small body of men in a surprise attack on the Ottoman artillery, thus robbing the enemy of artillery support as the main Persian attack went in; and his flanking movement through neighboring valleys to attack Moghul troops in the Khyber pass from the rear in November 1738. The latter action was studied by the Russians in the nineteenth century as giving the best model for an invasion of India—the Russian General Kishmishev described it as 'a masterpiece in the History of War.'²⁶

Nader's troops were recruited in all the territories of his empire and in the lands through which he campaigned. We read of recruits marched off from the Lezge tribes of Daghestan, recruited from the Yusufzais of the Indus valley, from the Abdali Afghans of what is now western Afghanistan, and young Persian *javanmard* from the countryside around Isfahan. The last-mentioned, according to the records of the Dutch East India Company, caused great trouble in Isfahan in early 1738—they 'committed all kinds of violence in the city and had respect for nobody'—until, finally, they were marched off to Kandahar.²⁷ As was the case elsewhere in the eighteenth century, the troops tended to come from the lowest classes of society—from among the poor of the towns, the peasants of

²⁵See, for example, Vatatzes, *Persica*, 282–3.

²⁶Quoted in Christopher Bellamy, *The Evolution of Modern Land Warfare: Theory and Practice* (London, 1990), 214.

²⁷Willem Floor, *Nader Shab* (forthcoming).

the countryside, and especially, the nomadic tribes of the provinces, who supplied most of the cavalry recruits.

Many of these (Turkmen, Uzbeks, Afghans, Baluchis, and Kurds) were Sunnis, unlike the Shi'a Afshars and Qajars of the old Qezelbash tribes, and the infantry recruited in the Persian heartlands. This was significant in two ways. First, it seems Nader had recruited the Sunni troops in the early 1730s deliberately as a counterbalance to the Shi'a infantry and cavalry, many of whom tended to support the old Safavid dynasty. Second, the Shi'a/Sunni split in the army was an important factor in the religious policy Nader followed from the time of his coronation in 1736, which attempted to minimize the Shi'a practices that offended Sunni Muslims.²⁸ Turning on its head the principle that ethnic or religious divisions would weaken an army, Nader placed men from the same tribes in their own discrete units, and would set the units in competition against each other, to see which would distinguish themselves by their bravery and aggression.²⁹

But an exception to the social rule were some of the troops of the guard units, who were recruited from among the families of the chiefs of rebellious tribes that Nader had resettled in Khorasan. The resettlement policy was an important pillar of Nader's rule.³⁰ These young men provided Nader with some excellent, spirited cavalry. But they also stood effectively as hostages for the good behavior of their families and tribes, and their presence within the army removed from the tribes the youthful element that would otherwise have been likely to cause the most trouble for Nader's regime.

One aspect that is important to mention is the question of foreign advisers and specialists. The sources mention these at a number of points. Often, the references are rather vague, but it is clear that Nader had help from the Russians at the siege of Ganja in 1735, for example, in the form of gunners and cannon. A foreign engineer is mentioned as having designed a kind of pontoon bridge for Nader in the course of the campaign in Ottoman Iraq of 1733. He is described as a German, but it seems more likely he was a Russian of German origin.³¹ (The bridge collapsed at an unfortunate moment and nothing further is heard of the engineer.) Russians are also mentioned in one account of Nader's campaign in India, but this seems doubtful.

The context for all this is the Persian/Russian alliance, an anti-Ottoman alliance, which lasted (despite some uneasy patches) for the whole period of Nader's career, beginning with contacts between the Russians and the court of Tahmasp in 1725/1726. The Greek traveler, Basile Vatatzes, appears to have

²⁸For an extended discussion of Nader's religious policy, see Ernest Tucker, "Nadir Shah and the Ja'fari Madhhab Reconsidered," *Iranian Studies* 27, no. 1-4 (1994): 163-179; and his recent book *Nadir Shah's Quest for Legitimacy in Post-Safavid Iran* (Florida, 2006).

²⁹Most notably at the siege of Kandahar in 1738; see Axworthy, *The Sword of Persia*, 184-5.

³⁰See J.R. Perry, "Forced Migration in Iran During the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," *Iranian Studies* 8, no. 4 (1975): 199-215.

³¹Astarabadi, *Jahangosha-ye Naderi*, 1: 162.

carried some messages between the Russians and the Persians at this early stage, and it is possible that they involved the provision of some military assistance.³² But there is no suggestion in the sources so far available that the military assistance went beyond the provision of help with specialist artillery advisers and engineers; for example, there is no mention of drill sergeants or weapons manufacturers. There is no indication that foreign help was responsible for Nader's military successes to any major extent, and certainly no evidence of any kind of slavish imitation of contemporary Russian or western military practice. On the contrary, prominent features of Nader's army, like the jazayerchis and zanburaks, have no direct parallel in western armies of the period and appear to be intelligent and effective adaptations to the different conditions of eastern warfare.

Nader only lost one major battle in his career (at Baghdad in 1733), but he never confronted a European enemy trained to the standard of fire discipline and linear tactics that were the norm in the west at this time. Some would assume that his troops would inevitably have been overwhelmed by the western tactical system of elaborate drill and uniforms, formalized maneuver, and rolling volley fire. But consider the battle of Jena in 1806. That was the decisive encounter in which the Prussian army, which epitomized the eighteenth-century system, was defeated by the modernized French system, which emphasized simplified drill and uniforms, speed of maneuver, large numbers, a rationalized and tightly-integrated chain of command, a much greater emphasis on mounted and dismounted light troops and skirmishers, a strong artillery corps to wear down the enemy prior to the decisive tactical moment, and a powerful reserve of heavy cavalry to deliver the shock charge at that moment. That latter description is strikingly apposite also for Nader Shah's military system. The subject of the differences between European and Eastern warfare in this period, and the patterns of influence between them, is a complex one, which is worthy of further study.³³ In the east, there was a greater emphasis on mounted warfare, reflecting the distances covered by armies on the move, and the traditions of tribal nomads. The infantry did not use the bayonet and seem to have kept cavalry at a distance by the use of heavier-caliber muskets that had a longer range than their European equivalents (the fact that mounted troops in Eastern armies tended to pay for their own horses might also have been a factor. Loss of a horse could mean ruin. Nader paid for his soldiers' horses himself to negate this³⁴). But in many ways the changes that transformed

³²Basile Vatatze, *Voyages de Basile Vatace en Europe et en Asie*, ed. E. Legrand (Paris, 1886), 223. See also Axworthy on Vatatze in *Oriente Moderno*, 332–333 and note.

³³For further discussion, see Axworthy, *The Sword of Persia*, 83–4. See also Jos Gommans, "Indian Warfare and Afghan Innovation During the Eighteenth Century," in *Warfare and Weaponry in South Asia 1000–1800*, ed. J.L. Gommans and D.H.A. Kolff (New Delhi, 2001). It is likely that many of the practices examined by Gommans (notably the use of short, blunderbuss-style cavalry carbines) originated in the army of Nader Shah, in which Ahmad Shah Durrani had served as commander of the Afghan contingent.

³⁴Abraham of Crete, *The Chronicle of Abraham of Crete*, 118.

the practice of war in Europe at the end of the eighteenth century brought western armies closer to an eastern model.

One of Nader's great strengths was his attention to logistics—to the arrangements that made sure that his men were kept fed, clothed, paid, mounted, and equipped with effective weapons. There is little mention in the sources of desertion being a problem, and only rarely of problems of supply (an exception being the disastrous Daghestan campaign of 1742/43, one of the shakier periods of the Persian/Russian alliance, in which the Russians seemed to have deliberately colluded with Nader's enemies, the Lezge tribesmen, who fought an effective guerrilla war against him). In the course of his longer sieges (notably at Baghdad in 1733 and Kandahar in 1737/38), he built what were effectively new cities to keep his men healthy and to avoid the epidemics of disease that often defeated besieging armies in the early modern period. Nader was often giving orders for the preparation of his next campaign before the current one was concluded.

But Nader's attention to the well-being of his soldiers had heavy consequences for the wider population of his territories. Taxation was high and was often hiked higher still at short notice. Citizens were beaten to get the money. Toward the end of his reign, many went into hiding or even into exile to avoid the tax officials. Nader's demands became so severe that the economy withered for want of coin to exchange and sparked revolts that were put down with increasing severity until, at last, one of them brought down Nader himself. In the long term, the army Nader created was insupportable for a state the size of Persia. It has been estimated that while there were around thirty million people in the Ottoman territories in the eighteenth century, and perhaps 150 million in the Moghul Empire, Persia's population fell perhaps as low as six million, from nine million before the Afghan invasion.³⁵ Over the same period, the economy collapsed as a result of invasion, war, and exactions to pay for war. Willem Floor has estimated that trade fell to a fifth of its former level over this period.³⁶

Nader used government cleverly, made some important innovations, and had a strong administrative grip. His religious policy was novel, secularizing, and more tolerant in spirit.³⁷ In military matters, he was wholly modern. He established the beginnings of a navy, and it now seems plain that something very like a Military Revolution, as described by Geoffrey Parker and others, was brought about in Persia by Nader Shah. It was under him that the majority of troops in the army were equipped with firearms for the first time, necessitating a greater emphasis on drill and training, characteristic of developments that had taken place in Europe in the previous century. The army increased greatly in size and

³⁵C.A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World 1780–1830* (London, 1989), 23; C. Issawi, *The Economic History of Iran 1800–1914* (Chicago, 1971), 20; W. Floor, *The Economy of Safavid Persia* (Wiesbaden, 2000), 2–3.

³⁶Willem Floor, "Dutch Trade in Afsharid Persia (1730–1753)" (article, forthcoming).

³⁷Axworthy, *The Sword of Persia* (London, 2006), 169.

cost, and Nader was forced to make improvements in his capability for siege warfare. Nader began to reshape state administration and to review tax structures to make them more efficient.³⁸ These are all elements that have been shown to be typical of the Military Revolution in Europe.

If Nader had reigned longer and more wisely and had passed on his rule to a competent successor, the drive to pay for his successful army could have transformed the Persian state administration and, ultimately, the economy (as happened in Europe), as Parker and others have argued. Like it or not, military absolutism was often the precursor to economic and political development in this period. It could have brought about in Iran a modernizing state capable of resisting colonial intervention in the following century. If that had happened, Nader might today be remembered in the history of Iran and the Middle East as a figure comparable with Peter the Great in Russia: as a ruthless, militaristic reformer who set his country on a new path.³⁹ But Nader's derangement in the last five years of his life meant that his military innovations turned Persia into a desert rather than modernizing the country. His insatiable demands for cash to pay his world-beating army brought about his own downfall and that of his dynasty.

³⁸For the reforms, see Axworthy, *The Sword of Persia*, 180, and A.K.S. Lambton, "The Tribal Resurgence and the Decline of the Bureaucracy in the Eighteenth Century," in *Studies in 18th Century Islamic History*, ed. Thomas Naff and Roger Owen (Carbondale and Edwardsville, 1977), 123–7. Nader also confiscated, as an act of state policy, a large proportion of the over-expanded religious endowments (*awqaf*) that have been regarded as a major cause of the progressive enfeeblement of the previous Safavid dynasty (see Mansur Sefatgol, "The Question of Awqaf Under the Afsharids," in *Studia Iranica: Cahiers vol 21/Materiaux pour l'Histoire Economique du Monde Iranien*, ed. Rika Gyselen and Maria Szuppe [Paris, 1999] and Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World 1780–1830* (London, 1989). One element that is missing is the expansion of a system of financial credit to permit large state loans for military purposes, as was important in the career of Wallenstein, in the development of English military and naval power, and in the military history of France in the eighteenth century (ending with disaster in the French Revolution when the state's insolvency brought collapse). But the significance in the Afsharid regime of Taqi Khan Shirazi, Nader's financial adviser among other things, and the prospect of expanded trade with India, raise the possibility that even that could have emerged in Persia in time.

³⁹Peter the Great ruled from 1682 to 1725 (forty-three years), and most of the modernizing reforms we associate with him took place in the latter part of his reign. Even if we include the years of his regency after 1732, Nader ruled for only fifteen years. The beginnings of administrative reform were there, and indications of a desire to protect trade. My argument is not that Nader had a grand plan for the modernization of Persia; rather, it is that, as happened in Europe, these things could have happened as a result of a process set in motion by his military innovations. But there was not enough time, and the picture is muddled by the contrary effects of Nader's avaricious derangement in the last five years of his life.

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