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Roman Siebertz, M.A.



Die Briefmarken Irans als Mittel der politischen Bildpropaganda“

The Stamps of Iran as an Instrument of Iconographical Propaganda 1868-1979

From the very beginning the stamps of Iran combined the attributes of an article of daily life with that of an instrument of political propaganda. Beyond their original function, i.e. that of a receipt for the payment of postage fees, stamps are always used as a transmitter for political messages. By the aid of well-reasoned and carefully designed illustrations they transport, directly or indirectly, a political message that is aimed at a broader audience. However the illustrations of stamps are always created within a certain social and ideological environment which influences the thinking of their creators as well as that of the recipients of the messages transmitted by these images. This study shall deal with the propagandistic aspect of stamps in a historical perspective. The stamps of Iran from their coming into existence until the Islamic Revolution shall be regarded as a source of modern Iranian history that reflects the political and ideological processes occurring during the last 130 years. The stamps shall be investigated against the background of historical events and developments which are necessary for the understanding of these stamps' motives. It shall also be demonstrated what we can learn about the social and political history of Iran from this kind of source. First of all, the appearance of stamps in Iran was a symptom for the efforts of modernization during the first half of Nasr od-Din Shah's rule. As early as in the 1840ies Mirza Taqi Khan Amir Kabir, the shah's supreme minister, had made the proposal for the organization of a regular postal service between the cities of Iran at fixed transportation fees. But it should take another twenty years until this project was finally realized. Some years before the reorganization of the Iranian postal service actually took place (under the supervision of a senior official of the Austrian post office), a delegation was sent to France in 1244 s/1868 to discuss the design and printing of postage stamps.



The design approved by this delegation had been created by the Imperial mint in Paris and showed the imperial arms, Lion and Sun, in a circle. That design had most probably been influenced by contemporary Iranian coins and followed very closely the example

of the first European postage stamps, which had also been created taking coins as a pattern. This was only consequential, since postage stamps were first of all, similar to money, a legal tender to pay the postage of letters. Therefore, the appearance of symbols of statehood, like Lion and Sun, signified first of all the government's claim of exclusive control over its fiscal affairs. In addition to this, stamps also reflected the new forms of self-understanding and self-representation to which the Qajar rulers had begun to resort very soon after their assumption to power. One measure of the new dynasty to consolidate its newly gained control over the whole territory of Iran was to install a symbolic presence of the monarch by representative buildings and public monuments in many different places. Soon this was extended to other instruments of communication, traditional and modern. At the same time, for instance, the image of the Shah also began to appear on coins, and little later the governmental newspapers started to publish the portraits of ministers and imperial palaces. The appearance of Nasr-od-Din Shah's portrait on postage stamps from 1876 on was just another element of this extensive governmental propaganda policy. As a propaganda medium, however, stamps were much more than architecture and newspapers able to epitomize the modern state that had begun to emerge in Iran during that period. As an item imported from Europe to rationalize the postal service, the stamp itself demonstrated both Iranians and Westerners that Iran was now becoming a modern state with efficient institutions as they already existed in European countries. But they also symbolized another characteristic of modern statehood; the effort of the state to exercise complete control over his territory and his subjects by omnipresent institutions. The postage stamp, that transported the Shah's image and the symbols of governmental authority to every part of Iran, made every inhabitant of the country known with his monarch and at the same time with the state's claim for authority. It was a symbol as well as an instrument of structural modernization.

This aspect of stamps, being a manifestation of political sovereignty, became evident during the Constitutional Revolution when revolutionary movements like the insurgents under Sattar Khan in Tabriz and Seyyed Abd ol-Hossein in Lar issued stamps of their own in order to express their rejection of the central government.

So did the leaders of autonomist movements in the years after World War I, like the Azadestan-Movement of Shaykh Mohammad Khiabani in Tabriz or the Jangali-Movement in Gilan. Thereby, as an expression of statehood, postal stamps had begun to fulfill the same task that coins had occupied in earlier times. Stamps were not only a symbol for the modernization of the Iranian state and society, but they also began indirectly to reflect the conflict between the ruling political class and the new elite of modernist intellectuals which had been caused by the new political and social developments. The measures taken for modernization, or in fact the copying of western institutions and ideas in order to respond effectively to the threat of colonialism, did not really improve the situation of Iran. Many of the nationalist intellectuals held the existing political and social structures responsible for this failure and vehemently attacked the political elite and especially the Qajar rulers, whom they blamed for preventing any progress through their despotic style of government. In the political discourse of the modernist nationalists, the traditional understanding of the state and its definition through the person of the sovereign had become questionable and the traditional symbols of statehood had lost their meaning. For these circles, the portrait of Mohammad Ali Shah in his full coronation habit did no longer



represent the authority of the state, but much more epitomized the political system that was responsible for the country's present lamentable situation.

It is therefore not surprising that the Constitutional Revolution, besides reshaping the structural and ideological fundamentals of statehood, also brought a first significant change in the iconography of Iranian stamps. The stamps did not immediately reflect the political events and developments that occurred during those years, but their motives indicate that a far-reaching change had taken place in the political culture of Iran in the wake of these events. One of the first signs of change was the replacement of the shah's portrait on stamps by the emblem of Lion and Sun after Mohammad Ali Shah's deposition by the parliament in 1288/1909. This was in the first place an emergency solution, since other symbols of national sovereignty were not yet available. But by choosing this motive one may also see a revolutionary message: Now, the state was no longer defined through the person of the monarch, but by the government and her institutions.

This new understanding of state and nation was further elaborated on two sets of stamps that were prepared in celebration of the coronation of Ahmad Shah. The iconography of these two sets reflects, in a literally illustrative way, the discourses on national identity and political legitimacy that had become dominating during the constitutional era. One aspect of the new definition of nation was the emergence of a historicist perception of Iranian national identity, strongly influenced by the acquaintance with European Oriental studies and the rediscovery of Iran's pre-Islamic history. The aim of this new interest in history was to transform the past into a blueprint for the country's future. The culture and monuments of the Sassanid and especially the Achaemenid era were not only seen as a part of cultural heritage. The declined glory of ancient Iran was also quoted as a counterdesign to the actual state of Iran identified with political weakness and backwardness; the political ethics of the ancient kingship as an alternative to Qajar despotism. By choosing images and symbols of kingship from the ruins of Persepolis as illustrations for the new stamps, it was intended to reconcile the demands and expectations of the constitutional activists with the ruling dynasty. The iconography of the new stamps was supposed to suggest that the accession of Ahmad Shah marked the beginning of a new era in the country's history. It was also suggested that under his reign, justice, welfare and security should prevail.

The second set, whose stock could not get delivered to Iran in time (due to the outbreak of World War I) and which was therefore never issued, also tried to legitimize Qajar rule by a reference to history, but in a more traditional way. By showing the portraits of Iranian monarchs from Nadir Shah to Ahmad Shah and the views of imperial architecture of the past centuries, like the royal palaces of Ali Qapu, Chehel Sotun and Enzeli, it followed to a very great extent the ways of iconographical propaganda which had emerged during the Naseri era. On the other hand, also in this set three views of the majlis building indicated that constitution and people's sovereignty had become an essential element of political legitimacy at the time. (As a footnote, it is very probable that this set had been designed following the pattern of a set issued in Russia in 1913 in celebration of the 300th anniversary of the accession of the Romanov dynasty.) Exemplary as these stamps are as documents for the history of political thinking and for the development of iconographical propaganda, they nevertheless did not find any successor with a similar political program within the next twenty years.

This was partly owed to the paralytic state into which Iran was plunged by the events of war, but also caused by the fact that the old patterns of design and iconographical propaganda were still in use on stamps during the first ten years of Reza Shah's reign. At first glance this may be surprising, taking into account the demonstrative break with the past performed by the new regime. But the style of Reza Shah's government, with its arbitrary decisions and the

concentration of absolute power in the person of the monarch, was not very different to that of the Qajar rulers. Therefore it was only natural that the portrait of the Shah symbolized the Iranian state in a very traditional manner also on the new stamps, while on the new stamps the portrait of Ahmad Shah was obliterated or stamps bearing lion and sun were overprinted „Provisional Pahlavi Government“ (Hokumat-e Movaqti-ye Pahlavi). In the course of time the political message of those illustrations was further elaborated by accompanying the Shah's portrait with attributes that gave further indications on the system's political pretensions. The Achaemenid capitals, which began to flank the Shah's effigy in the thirties served to the same purpose as elements of ancient architecture did on Ahmad Shah's coronation set, i.e. to suggest that the ruling regime was not in the succession of its 'corrupt' predecessor but instead founded on the ethical fundamentals of the old, sacred tradition of kingship embodied in Iranian culture. Another, new subject that entered the iconography of Iranian stamps at the time was the modern, centralized nation state and the various symbols that represented it.

The state's attempt to gain complete control over the whole country and over all social strata and ethnic groups of its society and to transform Iran into a powerful, industrialized nation able to cope with the great powers was maybe the most important feature of modernization in the Pahlavi era. The cultural and administrative uniformization of Iran was mostly seen as a precondition to achieve these aims. The „Pahlavi hat“, which was introduced in the 1920ies to replace the traditional headgears by a modern, uniform one created according to a 'western' pattern, was also an instrument and a symbol of this policy. Within the framework of this new-emerging symbolism of power the traditional display of the Shah's portrait on stamps could also transport a new message. By wearing a Pahlavi hat, Reza Shah not only legitimized the state by his authority as an absolute ruler, but he also epitomized the modernizing nation, whose construction was guaranteed by his rule. This message was elaborated in a commemorative set in celebration of the tenth anniversary of Reza Shah's accession to the throne. The issue of this set, that had been proposed by the Minister of PTT, had been resolved by the leading members of the cabinet and its motives had been carefully chosen. This set deserves a closer investigation, because it is the first set of stamps presenting a devised political program and since it illustrates the ideas and the self-understanding of Iran's political elite during the Reza Shah period. The illustrations of the set's nine stamps reflected the current political iconography of that time (e.g. in magazines and newspapers) which was dominated by symbols of cultural and technical progress, like images of industrial plants, railway- and telegraph lines or allegories of trade and science. It represented, so to speak, iconographical commonplaces.

Even the reminiscence to the glorious past as an iconographical standard topic is not omitted: The ruins of Persepolis being shown on one stamp. Other stamps showed the achievements of the past decade, namely industrialization (the cement factory of Rey), a modern system of transportation (the Trans-Iranian railway), national sovereignty (navy and air force), communication (GPO building) social welfare (the sanatorium of Ramsar) and the modernization of society according to western standards (allegories of justice and education).

The political message delivered by all these icons is ambiguous: On the one hand these symbols represented the demands of both the reformist and revolutionary intelligentsia from the time of Nasrod-Din Shah until Shah's ascendancy with the insinuation that the aspirations of this groups had become reality under the new regime. On the other hand, by enumerating the institutions of the modern centralized state, an authoritarian and at some times even despotic political system presented all its instruments of power. This ambiguity also reflects



the situation of those who were responsible for issuing this set and may even explain why they had taken that decision. Under the impression of the failure of the parliamentary system during World War I, many of the former members of the constitutionalist movement had decided that a transformation of the Iranian society was only possible under a powerful central government and therefore supported the rise of Reza Shah in order to attain their own political ends. Among those who decided to celebrate the accession of the Shah with a set of stamps were not only political careerists, like prime minister Mahmud Jam, but also personalities like Mohammad Ali Foroughi, the founder of Tehran University, Ali Akbar Davar, who set up the modern judicial system, or the minister of Post and Telegraph, Nezam ed-Din Hekmat, who actually had worked himself to death on his post. When these men decided to celebrate the anniversary of the new dynasty by referring to the achievements of the Shah's regime, they not only aimed at erecting their own monument, but they also might have tried to justify their participation in the political system.

Anyhow, to which extent the Pahlavi state identified itself with symbols of modernity such as industrial plants and modern architecture, was made clear by another set of stamps. On those stamps, the portrait of the shah was replaced by views of railway bridges and governmental buildings. The issuing of this set had been prepared under the reign of Reza Shah, at the end of 1940, but presumably due to the events of the following year, the stamps were not issued before 1942. By the time of Reza Shah's abdication, the iconography of power on the stamps of Iran had almost fully been developed. During the next four decades, until the Islamic Revolution, no essential alterations can be found, except those which were necessary to adjust the canon of symbols and images to the current guidelines of official politics. The turbulent years between 1941 and 1953 were not reflected by the stamps of that period, since there was a continuity concerning as well the subjects dealt with on stamps as to those who were responsible for that task as ministers of PTT. During the period mentioned above, these were mostly men who were either staunch supporters of the court, like Manuchehr Eqbal, or men who held this post as well before as after the coup d'état of 1332, like Amir Qasem Eshraqi. Similarly the subjects of stamps were not different from those issued in earlier times. Sets were issued that celebrated the ruling dynasty (a set in commemoration of the consecration of Reza Shah's mausoleum at Shahabdolazim) or the unity and independence of the Iranian nation (a set in memory of the crushing of the autonomy movement in Azerbaijan). For this reason, a set issued under the premiership of Mohammed Mossadeq in celebration of the nationalization of the Iranian oil industry was not a remarkable exception, but fitted well into a body of subjects and images that dominated the iconographical propaganda on stamps during that period. Shortly after the coup d'état, for example, a similar set was issued in celebration of the nationalization of the fishing industry.

The advent of royal dictatorship after 1953 did not change the design or the subjects of Iranian stamps either, but introduced new aspects into the traditional iconographic patterns. The railways, industrial plants and portraits of members of the imperial family were still standard topics. Till the eve of the Islamic Revolution, the state was, like before, on stamps represented by the Shah's portrait, which was on later sets sided by the ruins of Persepolis or by views of industrial plants, dams, universities and other traditional symbols of modernity.

Apart from that, however, two new tendencies can be found in the iconography of stamps during that period. The conflict between shah and nation that had taken place under Mossadeq's premiership had made it clear that the approbation of a government by the Iranian population had by now become an important factor in the legitimacy of any political system. The former elitist discourse on modernization and industrialization therefore was then accompanied by a popular or even populist one. Not only was the monarchy now legitimized by the idea of a sacred kingship bound to divine law and justice als a part of Iranian culture

(that conception that had become popular during the late Qajar era), but the organized riots in favor of the shah that went along with the overthrow of the government of Mossadeq were now interpreted as popular support for Mohammad Reza Shah's reign. According to this particular understanding of political legitimacy, the monarchy was the realization of the people's aspirations and therefore the manifestation of democracy in Iran. In a commemorative set issued at the first anniversary of the coup d'état, the ministry of postal affairs even went so far as to propagate this message using symbols which had dominated the iconography of the leftist democratic movement in the years before, like broken chains, the torch of liberty and the Iranian national flag. At the same time the slogan „Fidélité au Roi“ that appeared on these stamps made it quite clear that the imperial government expected its own population to rush out to demonstrate its loyalty towards the ruling regime, but not to demand a share in political power.



In later times, that pretension of the monarchy to safeguard the people's aspirations for independence and freedom went along with an outspoken patrimonial attitude towards the own population. Since democracy in the Pahlavi state was defined as popular support for a political system embodied in the person of the shah, the monarch still remained the main source of legitimacy. National politics were not designed by the people, but for the people. Therefore the stamps presented Mohammad Reza Shah as the one who knew the needs and desires of his subjects and the only one who was able to realize them; a sort of Father of the Fatherland who usually appeared in a Saviourlike attitude. The presence of the Iranian people, on whose behalf this state pretended to exercise its power, was limited to the background or to a small number of grateful subjects paying tribute to their ruler. Although it permanently appealed to the support of its subjects, the state of the Pahlavis pursued something one might call 'populism without people' in its propaganda.

Another heritage of the years of turmoil before 1953 was the increased role of the parliament as a factor in Iranian politics whose influence could only be curbed but not eliminated under the royal dictatorship. As a source of legitimacy, parliamentarism and the constitution of 1907 now had to be taken into consideration. Symbols of constitutionalism, like the gate of the parliament or the statue of the angel of freedom in front of the majles building, entered into the iconography of stamps, thus symbolizing the aspiration of the Pahlavi state to protect the constitution and to safeguard the rule of law.

Another predominant subject of Iranian stamp propaganda in the time of Mohammad Reza Shah, that was closely connected with the aspiration to be acknowledged as a democratic political system, was the affiliation of Iran to the Western world. In earlier times, the adoption of modern technology like railways and factories into the official political iconography took place in order to demonstrate the claim of the modernist elite of Iran to be accepted in the circle of the 'advanced' Western nations, symbolized by attributes of modernity and progress that had entered the iconographical discourse of the reformist movements during the Qajar era.

The constant appearance of modern technology on stamps under the rule of Mohammad Reza Shah, the commemorative sets issued for new railway lines, industrial plants, industrial fairs and congresses on transportation and communication served the same purpose. Since World War II and especially since the coup d'état of 1953 another aspect of this affiliation to the West became a central part in the stamp propaganda: The image of Iran as a partner of the

Western world. The origins of this new line of propaganda can be traced back to the aftermath of the war, when in 1949 the Iranian post issued a set of stamps in commemoration of the country's war efforts on the allies' side. The illustrations of this set showed the national flag as a symbol of national sovereignty on one stamp and on another freight trains and truck columns transporting supplies for the Soviet forces. Again, this may not be regarded as an occasion worth celebrating, since the decision of the Iranian government to join the allied coalition in 1942 was nothing else than an effort to retain a limited co-determination in matters of foreign policy after Iran's occupation by British and Soviet forces one year earlier. But regardless of that, the participation in the war on the winners' side was a fact which the Iranian government could use to profile itself vis-a-vis western public opinion. By putting into oblivion the fact that Iran had entered the war being occupied as a potential confederate of National-Socialist Germany, the enforced cooperation with the allies was now taken as another proof that the country had entered the ranks of respectable nations whose policies were dedicated to the values western democracy. It must have been of great importance to the Shah's government to deliver this message to the governments of the world. The Iranian delegate to the United Nations in New York was ordered to send a specimen of that set to every other delegate at the U.N. general assembly.

This tendency was intensified after 1953, when the Shah had decided to safeguard his recently gained position of absolute power by closely tying his country politically and economically to the West and especially to the United States. As well as in regard to its own population to whom it had to explain its legitimacy, the Iranian government had to convince the western audience of its claim that Iran was a stronghold of the 'free world' in the Middle East and a reliable and trustworthy partner of the West. By regularly issuing stamps celebrating the anniversaries of the foundation of the United Nations and the issuing of the declaration of human rights, or in celebration of the official visits of foreign heads of state (from president de Gaulle and Queen Elizabeth to Emperor Haile Selassie and the President of Pakistan) the state propaganda did not become tired to point out Iran's commitment to the values of western democracy and the high esteem that the Shah enjoyed among western leaders. By boasting with the recognition by western governments and by the most important allies of America in Africa and Asia, however, the regime tried to secure the political and military support from these states against the Soviet Union (seen by the Shah as the most dangerous enemy towards his regime). After the coup d'état of 1953 and the forced end to democracy and parliamentarism in Iran the Shah and his government were obviously interested in convincing themselves, their own population and the rest of the world of their political and moral respectability (how incredible and unconvincing the reference to parliamentarism and human rights may have been in regard to reality under the Pahlavi regime).

This aspiration found its expression not exclusively on the stamps dedicated to political issues. The modernization of Iranian society according to western standards was symbolized not only by presenting technical progress, but also by assuming elements of the Western, and especially American, upper- and middle-class culture. This tendency was manifested in stamps commemorating the opening of the Tehran Hilton-Hotel or the founding anniversaries of the Lions- and Rotary-Club. Such stamps, of course, only reflected the lifestyle of a small elite, not a common trend in the Iranian society at the time; and the rather indiscriminate incorporation of some elements taken from a foreign culture was not that much the sign of progressivity that it was taken for. Such images rather reflected the negative aspects of the forced modernization that an otherwise sympathetic observer of this policy had summarized as the „inflated glorification of the past, a deprecation for foreigners that easily betrays a sense of inferiority, an appetite for industrialization far beyond the the bonds of efficiency and welfare but as a symbol of prestige and status, an indiscriminate imitation of the surface gloss

of western societies, and a burning desire to become a truly sovereign and consequential power“ (Amin Banani).



Rather than an effective self-representation the subjects and illustrations of stamps during the Sixties and Seventies were a symptom of the cultural and social crisis which Iran faced at the time. In a broader sense they even reflected what was branded by contemporary Islamic as well as secular thinkers as `gharbzadegi`, i.e. self-destruction by cultural and political sellout. Finally the iconographical propaganda of the Pahlavis proved to be an ineffective instrument of persuasion in regard to the own population, since the political discourses had changed significantly in the meantime.

This was, however, not the case abroad, where this propaganda proved to be quite effective until the fragility of the political and economical system became apparent in the late seventies. The massive impact of royal dictatorship, the contry's growing economic and political dependence to the West and the erosion of traditional structures caused by the enforced modernization, had created an atmosphere of dissatisfaction and anxiety. For most Iranians, all the symbols and images of the official iconography (and therefore the iconography of stamps, too) did not reflect their demands and aspirations. To the contrary, they epitomized a political system and social and cultural developments that were deeply rejected by a growing number of people. In contradiction to the original intention, all those symbols did not promote an identification of the citizens with their state. They became much more documents of an alienation between the state and the people quite in the same way as in earlier times the portrait of Mohammad Ali Shah on stamps had represented the commonly rejected despotic system. It was surely not an accidently decision, that after the victory of the Islamic Revolution all stamps, previously issued, were banned from further use.

Due to the confrontation with the negative aspects of modernization, Iranian intellectuals began to turn towards religion and cultural tradition, especially popular culture, which became the basis of a new political ideology. In that new political discourse the aim of political action was not longer the idea of a mighty, industrialized nation, that had been discredited by the style of government of the ruling elite. In opposition to official ideology, the most important counter-design was the vision of an Islamic Republic, i.e. a harmonious society that was organized according to the principles of divine law and social justice. These two subjects would dominate the iconography of the stamps of Iran after 1979.

This Text is an abbreviated version of my Ph. D. thesis

Roman Siebertz

*Please contact Roman Siebertz M.A. by mail < roman.siebertz@gmx.net >
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