

**Review. Robert Steele, *The Shah's Imperial Celebrations of 1971. Nationalism, Culture and Politics in Late Pahlavi Iran*, London, I.B. Tauris, 2021.**

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An illustration published in October 1971 on the front page of *Iran Free Press*, an overseas-based opposition publication, depicts Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi cheering elegant foreigners at a party<sup>1</sup>. On the table chicken and pork, whereas in Islam pork is regarded as unclean and its consumption is forbidden. In the caption below the illustration, the Shah says: «Here's to us, forget about those beggars outside, they're just Iranians»<sup>2</sup>. In the same caption, Cyrus the Great replies: «Have your cruel joke, Shah, your thieving, murdering days are numbered»<sup>3</sup>. The illustration was published on the occasion of the celebrations by Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi of the 2500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Persian Empire by Cyrus the Great. Dozens of heads of state joined the Imperial Celebrations, where sumptuous banquets and entertainment were organised. According to several observers, the Shah was unable to resist the temptation of power. Reporting such lavish (and costly) Celebrations, European and North American journalists pointed out that many Iranians still lived in poverty. Consequently, this event is often remembered as a failure which led to his downfall in 1979.

Commenting the Celebrations, Ayatollah Khomeini declared from his exile in Najaf, Iraq: «In many of our cities and most of our villages there are no doctors and no medicines. There is no sign of schools, bath or drinking water. In some villages, the children are so hungry they graze in the fields. But this tyrannical regime spends millions of dollars on various shameful festivals. Most catastrophic of all, the 2500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the monarchy. Let the world know that these celebrations have nothing to do with the noble, Muslim people of Iran. All those who take part are traitors to Islam and the Iranian people»<sup>4</sup>. Ayatollah Khomeini read the Celebrations through his lenses of the White Revolution, and thus as a state propaganda. In fact, in August 1971 a royal decree had established the Religious Corps (*sepah-e din*) aiming at bureaucratizing the

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<sup>1</sup> R. Steele, *The Shah's Imperial Celebrations of 1971. Nationalism, Culture and Politics in Late Pahlavi Iran*, I.B. Tauris, 2021, 223 (Figure 10 from the collection of the International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>4</sup> H. Amini, *Decadence and the Downfall: The Shah of Iran's Ultimate Party*, BBC documentary, in R. Steele, R. Steele, *The Shah's Imperial Celebrations of 1971. Nationalism, Culture and Politics in Late Pahlavi Iran*, cit., 5.

*ulema* and at taking a progressive religion in line with the Pahlavi ideology of modernization to rural areas<sup>5</sup>.

The above-mentioned Khomeini's quotes are reported in a BBC documentary, first broadcast in 2016 and titled *Decadence and the Downfall: The Shah of Iran's Ultimate Party*. Showing images of the early 1970s, this documentary is undoubtedly fascinating. However, it repeats absurd claims without a proper scrutiny of sources, such as the declaration by a Swiss member of the catering staff, who stated that the two-day event at Persepolis had cost the equivalent of the entire national budget of Switzerland for two years. Besides media reports, the body of scholarly literature on the Imperial Celebrations is relatively small. Most accounts appeared in general histories of Pahlavi Iran or in political memoirs. Now, in his book *The Shah's Imperial Celebrations of 1971. Nationalism, Culture and Politics in Late Pahlavi Iran*, Robert Steele is offering scholarship of high quality. Currently Jahangir and Eleanor Amuzegar Postdoctoral Fellow in Contemporary Iranian Studies at UCLA, Steele makes an original contribution by offering fresh and reliable material to other historians working in the field of Iranian studies. For instance, space is dedicated to the Second International Congress of Iranology held at the Pahlavi University in Shiraz, in which nearly three hundred scholars from around the world participated but received little media coverage.

The book consists of an introduction, seven extensive chapters, a conclusion, a comprehensive bibliography, plus sixteen photographs, stamps on the Celebrations issued by several countries, and the illustration published by *Iran Free Press* quoted at the very beginning of this review. Steele's book opens with an introduction of the state-of-the-art. He defines the aims of the book as «to understand the rationale for the Celebrations and to analyse their success or failure in their own historical context, rather than employing the narrative of the 'doomed' shah» (p. 6). Steele states that «one should look at their origins, and explore the cultural aspects of the event, which were critical to its success and reveal more of the true nature of the undertaking. It proposes a calmer and more balanced assessment of the Celebrations that considers their intended economic, political and cultural impact» (p. 6). The purpose is «not to exonerate the Shah» but rather to provide an «objective assessment» (p. 6).

Chapter 1 provides the ideological and historical background, stressing how the Shah was certainly not the first to use large-scale national celebrations in order to stimulate awareness of the glorious past of his country. His father Reza Shah had already celebrated the ancient poet Ferdowsi in 1935 and built on the Aryan myth. Reza Shah did his best to demonstrate that Iran belonged to the Western family of nations and was not an Islamic country. For Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, accepting Shoja' al-Din Shafa's proposal to honour the memory of Cyrus the Great to project his own identity was an easy task: Cyrus the Great was loved by Iranians, and being an enlightened king, he had also the favour of the West. In a word, all political factions could buy in it.

The next chapter goes under the subtitle "The World's Centre of Happiness". In these pages the author investigates the planning and implementation of the official events of the Celebrations. By doing so, Steele provides the context needed to the analyses contained in the following chapters. An interesting point is the reason behind the Celebrations: «Since 1954 UNESCO had been encouraging member states to hold

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<sup>5</sup> F. Sabahi, *The Literacy Corps in Pahlavi Iran (1963-1979). Political, Social and Literary Implications*, Sapiens, 2002, 227-246.

commemorations of events or people of significance and published a list of proposals annually» (p. 32). Moreover, «At the General Conference of 1960, UNESCO urged the world to join in the commemoration of Cyrus» (p. 32). The celebrations were planned to take place in 1961. However, logistic difficulties – mainly lack of communication and appropriate accommodation – led to several postponements. The Celebrations eventually took place thirteen years later, well after Mohammad Reza's coronation in 1967. At any rate, the date 1971 offered no real historical evidence in the context of a 2,500-year anniversary. It was rather the year 1961 which marked 2,500 years since Cyrus the Great's conquest of Babylon in 539 BCE.

Chapter 3 focuses on international diplomacy at Persepolis. The evidence presented shows that «beyond the pomp and ceremony, the Celebrations largely achieved their international objectives». However, the starting point of this chapter is the Shah's failure to attract President Nixon and Queen Elizabeth. Nonetheless, as the author well explains, «the events of October 1971 stimulated political dialogue and trade discussions; in some cases, deals were sealed against the backdrop of the ancient ruins of Persepolis» (p. 55). These were indeed interesting years: in 1969 the Labour Party decided to cut the budget to the Royal Navy and thus withdrew from the Persian Gulf, ending the British protectorates on its southern coast. As a consequence, after British diplomatic engagement with the Shah of Iran, in 1971 the UAE, Qatar and Bahrain were allowed to come into existence as independent states.

Chapter 4 analyses the Celebrations and cultural policy. The Shah aimed at drawing attention to Iran's history and culture. In this regard, Steele writes: «While the ceremonies at Persepolis, Pasargadae and Tehran helped to articulate aspects of the Shah's national ideology, so too did museum exhibitions, academic conferences and scholarly publications» (p. 73). More than five hundred books on many different aspects of Iranian civilization and culture were published, nearly four hundred of which were printed in Iran. Moreover, on the occasion of the Celebrations it was planned to construct 2,500 commemorative schools to be run by the Literacy Corps which was established in 1963 as part of the Shah's White Revolution.

Chapter 5 focuses on international cultural activities as an important soft power in international relations. Exhibitions, conferences and international committees were set up. Hundreds of articles, brochures and books were published. Founded in 1934 by the British Foreign Office in order to counter German and Italian propaganda, during the Iranian Celebrations of 1971 the British Council provided a substantial contribution, providing «a clear example of the politicization of cultural activity» (p. 101).

Reported in Chapter 6, criticism of the Celebrations ranged from «over-reliance on foreign services» to «alleged corruption, spending and the ideological incongruity of the event» (109). The author well recalls Jalal Al-e Ahmad's famous essay *Gharbzadegi* (Westoxication). First published in 1962, this book offered a powerful critique of the Pahlavi regime and pointed out «the hypocrisy of Iran to celebrate its monarchical tradition, while its people were struggling to survive, and the country was over-reliant of foreign capital» (p. 109).

Finally, Chapter 7 offers an overview of the costs of the Celebrations: «depending on which source one reads, the estimated cost of the Celebrations fluctuates from the official figure of \$16.8 million stated by Asadollah 'Alam at the time to \$300 million, \$1 billion, and even \$4 billion. Herein lies the problem: when discussing the costs associated with

the Celebrations, do we include infrastructural development, or merely the entertaining of guests over five days in October 1971?», provocatively asks the author Robert Steele (p. 126). Besides uncovering the costs, this volume puts great emphasis on the unparalleled international cultural and scholarly operation spurred by the Iranian authorities for the occasion.

In short, *The Shah's Imperial Celebrations of 1971* is an objective assessment of the Imperial Celebrations. The author seeks to place the Celebrations in the context of the Shah's reign, rather than the Revolution and thus his fall. This volume, which I enjoyed reading, is bound to elevate the quality of scholarship on a little explored historical event by serving as an empirically solid platform on which to build further academic research. Taking into account Peter Brook's work *Orghast* in Persepolis, digging on those European men of theatre involved in the Celebrations would be, for instance, another fascinating topic of research. The English theatre and film director Peter Brook (b. 1925) worked with Ted Hughes and performed at the Festival of Arts of Shiraz-Persepolis, which was held annually from 1967. *Orghast* was an experimental play which was written in an invented language called "Orghast", in which classical Greek and Avestan were also used. Based on the myth of Prometheus, it was performed in two parts, with the first at Persepolis around dusk, and the second part at the nearby site of Naqsh-e Rostam at dawn. On the occasion of his trip to Iran, Peter Brook said: «Persia is a country in transition between past and present, a boiling mass of half East, half West. It is sharing these labels, but still has something that is more Eastern, in a very deep way, than anything we know, and yet it's more Western than even we'd like it to be»<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> P. Brook, as quoted in A. C. H. Smith, *Orghast at Persepolis*, Eyre Methuen, 1972, 53.