Shah of Shahs Study Guide

Shah of Shahs by Ryszard Kapuściński

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

Author Ryszard Kapuscinski provides personal reflections as well as a historical perspective on the 1979 Iranian revolution, in which Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi is forced from his throne and replaced by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini.

Kapuscinski begins the narrative well after the revolution has ended. He is trying to make sense of the various notes, interviews, and photographs he has collected during his time in Iran. Kapuscinski traces the lineage of Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, the last Shah. His grandfather was a soldier who escorted the assassin of a Shah to a public execution. Pahlavi's father, Shah Reza Khan, is a huge and imposing man with a large appetite for life and possessions and an obsession with his military. Shah Reza Khan is forced from the throne during World War II by Allied forces after he refuses to allow goods to be shipped on Iran's Trans-Iranian railroad. At the age of twenty-two, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, Reza Khan's son, becomes Shah.

Shah Pahlavi is an unsteady ruler, and in 1951 he is forced to flee the country after a popular revolt in which a liberal politician, Doctor Mossadegh, rises to Prime Minister and proceeds to nationalize Iran's oil. This is a disastrous move which is intolerable to the West, especially Britain, which has oil interests in the country. With the West's help, Mossadegh is forced down and the Shah resumes his monarchy after a few years in exile.

The Shah is an oppressive dictator, and his secret police, called Savak, terrorize citizens and cause much fear and unrest. This, along with a perception that the Shah is a puppet of the West, causes calls for the Shah's ouster from Ayatollah Khomeini, whom many in the Shiite faith believe is the Twelfth Imam of prophecy, destined to lead the people of earth into a new era of religious devotion.

In December 1973, the Shah announces to the world that he is increasing the cost of Iranian oil, pocketing the profits for the monarchy. He begins an immense new initiative to modernize Iran and add infrastructure, called the Great Civilization. This movement causes further alienation among the common people, who do not understand and do not benefit from the Shah's ambitious plans. Though the Shah does accomplish certain goals, the experiment is largely a failed one, causing resentment and billions of wasted dollars.

The proper start of the Iranian Revolution is traced to January 8, 1978, in which a propagandistic article against Khomeini is published by the Shah in a government newspaper. This causes rioting in Khomeini's home town of Qom, in which five hundred people are killed by police. Rioting spreads to subsequent towns and finally to Teheran, the capital. The Shah only responds with more violence, perpetuating the anger and resentment. By February of 1979, after massive strikes, the Shah is deposed and Khomeini returns from exile to lead. Kapuscinski touches lightly upon the famous hostage crisis in which dozens of Americans are held hostage in the U.S. Embassy.

Kapuscinski ends with reflections that the revolutionary order is just as inept, wasteful, and ultimately as violent and fearmongering as the monarchy it has replaced.

Cards, Faces, Fields of Flowers

Cards, Faces, Fields of Flowers Summary and Analysis

The author, Ryszard Kapuscinski, speaks of the mess in his hotel room. His tables are full of cryptic notes, notebooks, photos, cassettes and 8mm film. He is leaving Iran soon and must make sense of all of this fragmented media in his role as journalist.

International tourism has stopped in Iran, and he is the only guest in the hotel. Kapuscinski figures he is paying the salaries of the four staff members playing cards in the lobby downstairs.

As Kapuscinski and the staff sip tea (for alcohol is punishable by a whipping), they watch the ayatollah of Iran, Khomeini, address his followers from his home town of Qom. As Kapuscinski explains, Qom is a hundred miles south of the capital city of Teheran, and home to the most fervent religious fundamentalists in the country. Khomeini rules Iran from Qom, and he never leaves. He lives very simply in a dusty hovel. Kapuscinski remarks on Khomeini's lack of expression or emotion, contrasted with his lively and incisive eyes.

The staff translates for Kapuscinski from Farsi. Khomeini is asking for Iranians to unite and reject foreign influence. Kapuscinski believes that weaker countries like Iran turn inward and reject internationalism in a bid to retain some degree of autonomy and power. This includes rejecting foreign language. Whereas before English was a sort of international language, now the television and radio are a cacophony of dozens of languages, to Kapuscinski.

The television turns to a man who holds up pictures showing people gone missing in the recent violence. The next program shows photographs of army men who were recently executed for crimes that are read as each man's photo is shown.

Kapuscinski returns to his hotel for the night. Gunfire erupts, which happens every night. The city at night is very unsafe due to a variety of roaming gunmen, assassins, and militia members from various factions. There is no curfew, but most people with common sense stay inside locked doors at night. Kapuscinski has come to identity the allegiance of many of these armed men; others he is unsure about.

Daguerreotypes, pages 15 to 31

Daguerreotypes, pages 15 to 31 Summary and Analysis

Photograph 1: This is the oldest picture Kapuscinski has, dating from around 1896. It shows an older soldier, the grandfather of the last Shah of Iran, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, holding a prisoner with a chain. The prisoner is the assassin of another Shah, Shah Nasr-ed-Din. The story behind the photograph is that the men have been traveling for days to Teheran, the soldier escorting the prisoner to be executed, and they both look tired. The men depend on the kindness of strangers for lodging and a bit of food on this journey, and the soldier likes to brag about the important murderer he has captured.

The soldier demands foods from peasants at a hut he stops at, and they have nothing to give but their own food, some roots and dried locusts, which the soldier and prisoner eat greedily. They sleep for a time in a hut the soldier commandeers in a prison, then they continue on their journey.

Photograph 2: An officer of the Persian Cossack Brigade is explaining how to work a machine gun next to him to his colleagues. It's a 1910 Maxim gun. This officer is Reza Khan, son of the soldier in Photograph 1. Reza is a huge man, at least a head taller than his comrades. He has an imposing martial look.

The Brigade (the only standing army of the Shah in the early twentieth century) was commanded by Russian Vsevolod Lyakhov, and Reza is a protege of Lyakhov's. A promising soldier, Reza climbs the ranks and eventually replaces Lyakhov as commander in 1917 when the Shah suspects Lyakhov of Bolshevik sympathies.

Spurred on by Britain, Reza launches an overthrow of the government in 1921 and declares himself Minister of War and then Prime Minister. In 1925, the cowed parliament declares Reza the Shah.

Photograph 3: A 1926 photo showing Shah Reza and his son. The photo is a study in contrasts: Reza, forty-eight, is still striking, bold, and imposing, while the son, seven, is frail, pale, and nervous. Reza will come to rule Iran, which is what he changes Persia's name to, with an iron hand. He urges modernism and adoption of European culture, ruthlessly forbidding traditional culture. Reza murders and poisons nomads who won't commit to a permanent settlement. He canes a priest who gives a sermon critical of him, and he imprisons newspaper men who would dare criticize him. Though his reign is violent and terrifying, he also does some good for Iran, including building many roads and otherwise modernizing the country's infrastructure.

Photograph 4: This is a photograph of Roosevelt, Stalin, and Churchill meeting in Tehran during World War II. Kapuscinski provides the history: Shah Reza admired Hitler and was rooting for the Germans. When he forbids the Allied forces to use the trans-

Iranian railway to ship supplies to and from Russia, the Allies invades Iran and quickly causes most of Reza's army to surrender. Powerless, Reza agrees to abdicate his throne to his son, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, who at 22 becomes Shah. Reza is shipped off to Johannesburg in Africa, where he dies three years later living comfortably.

From the Notes 1: Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi is described after ascending to the title of Shah. He is a vain man who enjoys reading about himself and seeing statues of himself erected. He wears elevator shoes to appear taller and compels peasants to bow down and literally kiss his shoes. In 1949, a gunman posing as a photographer shoots Pahlavi and gravely wounds him. All told, there are five attempts on Pahlavi's life, forcing him to travel mostly by plane and always be surrounded by police.

Kapuscinski remarks that he does not have a young picture of Khomeini. Some believe that Khomeini is "the Awaited One," the Twelfth Imam. For Khomeini to always appear as an aged man seems almost confirmation of this belief.

Photograph 5: A photo of Doctor Mossadegh leaving parliament in the midst of an elated crowd. Mossadegh is a liberal politician, politically opposed to the Shah, who in 1951 becomes the Prime Minister and who nationalizes the country's oil, taking it out of the hands of the Shah. He becomes a nationwide hero, and the people believe they have become free—oil is freedom.

Photograph 6: This photo shows thirty-four-year-old Shah Pahlavi and his new wife, Soraya Esfandiari, during a 1953 brief exile in Rome. Doctor Mossadegh has taken over, but his nationalization of oil has proved disastrous. The Western world has boycotted Iranian oil, leaving the country in chaos. The Shah eventually signs an order, backed up by Britain, to depose Doctor Mossadegh and return his monarchy to power.

Daguerreotypes, pages 32 to 48

Daguerreotypes, pages 32 to 48 Summary and Analysis

Cassette 1: It takes only days to oust Doctor Mossadegh, who is imprisoned. The Shah forbids even the mention of his name, but Kapuscinski believes such forbidding only makes the memory of a man like Mossadegh stronger in the people's minds. People remember his progressive ideals, because he opened the people's eyes to the world. He was in the right, but he acted too soon. Doctor Mossadegh spends the last years of his long life (he lives to about ninety) living under house arrest in a farm outside Teheran. He dies in 1967.

From the Notes 2: Oil, especially in poor countries, represents a dream, the promise of easy wealth and power. It symbolizes fortune as a lucky accident, literally "striking it rich." But oil is deceptive, for governments can hoard the profits for themselves. And in the case of theocracies, religious institutions can make themselves very powerful as well. The Shah thought he would create a second America with his country's great oil wealth, but it was never to be. Oil does not replace wisdom.

From the Notes 3: Iranian/Persian Shahs have a long history of violence and meeting untimely ends. Very few Shahs die in peace surrounded by loved ones. Violence begets violence. There is the story of the monarch Agha Mohammed Khan, who orders the entire population of the city of Kerman to be murdered or, in the case of the children, blinded. This atrocity is remembered by the country long after the event, and the blind children remain to spread the story. Persia/Iran is a country with a history of tyrants overthrowing tyrants, with help from foreign nations behind the scenes.

Back to Shah Pahlavi: after Doctor Mossadegh is taken care of, Pahlavi has to determine how best to re-assume the throne, as he has thus far looked like a coward, fleeing to Rome during the worst of the fighting. He must meet the challenge of the Iranian masculine stereotype who is brash and disciplined and authoritarian (a trait that accounts for the oppression of Iranian women). The Shah decides to pander to religious elements by visiting the tomb of Ali, a Shiite Muslim holy place, prior to returning to his palace. Once back in Iran, the Shah builds up his military with help from America. However, the environment is ripe for revolution. Too many are starving and impoverished, and too many are fed up with the Shah.

From the Notes 4: People look to Qom for the beginnings of revolution. When the Shah extends diplomatic immunity to all U.S. military personnel, this act becomes a kind of last straw, and Ayatollah Khomeini rises to prominence calling for the Shah to be thrown out with revolution. Khomeini and others like him see the Shah as a puppet of foreign governments, and they wish to return to a more fundamental and independent Iran that is free of foreign influence.

Police arrest Khomeini, and people riot for his release. Though other ayatollahs were at that time better known or better educated, Khomeini is successful because of his successful harnessing of popular sentiment, and his persistence of one message: the Shah must go.

Photograph 7: This photograph shows a seemingly ordinary bus stop, but sitting there is an agent of Savak, the Shah's secret police. A Savak informant could be anyone, and any idle conversation with them could cause a person to "disappear," sometimes never to be seen again. In the photograph's scenario, the Savak agent takes an old man away to who-knows-where for mentioning that the weather is "oppressive," a word that could be taken to be a criticism of the Shah. The Savak numbered sixty thousand, with three million informants, and hid at all levels of society. The threat of Savak causes great fear and hostility between normal citizens.

Daguerreotypes, pages 48 to 60

Daguerreotypes, pages 48 to 60 Summary and Analysis

From the Notes 5: Kapuscinski speaks with a middle-aged couple about the horrors of Savak. Savak agents do not really care if one is innocent or guilty of speaking against the Shah. They take in the guilty and innocent alike, so as to create more fear and intimidation in the populace. They use brutal torture methods like extracting fingernails and drilling into skulls, and so even innocent people profess guilt so as to avoid further torture. Savak can hold public trials or closed military trials at their discretion, so there is no accountability. Artists and academics are among the many targets Savak chooses.

Photograph 8: This is the photograph of a boy of three whose family is kidnapped by Savak. Savak's torture methods are legendary; a favored device is called the "frying pan," consisting of an electrically heated table which the victim is tied to. There are also cruder methods, like throwing a man into a bag full of poisonous snakes or cats crazed with hunger. Savak advertises these methods so as to create even more fear.

Photograph 9: Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi is giving a speech on December 23, 1973, to a room full of journalists. He is announcing an increase in the price of oil, profits of which he will keep all to himself. He believes Iran will become a world power, and that in a few years Iran will have the same living standards as rich European countries.

The Shah begins modernization on a huge scale, building atomic power plants and steel mills, importing technology, and spending a large amount on his army. Officials, corporation heads, and politicians from around the world begin to approach the Shah to get a piece of the wealth explosion in Iran. The Shah becomes a darling of world media, and little attention is paid to the death and poverty that abounds in his dictatorship.

Cracks appear. There is no infrastructure to shoulder this great influx of goods, no suitable ports for the great many ships or suitable trucks to distribute the goods. Many billions are wasted with this lack of foresight. Furthermore, all the technology in the world doesn't mean anything without the proper people to operate it, which the Shah does not have, seeing as he has suppressed academics and students, who have gone elsewhere to escape his regime. So the Shah imports a great many foreigners—engineers, truck drivers, construction people, military people—to build his "Great Civilization." Meanwhile, the citizens of Iran develop a sort of inferiority complex, seeing the foreigners being hired to do things they cannot do. This leads to resentment and xenophobia, which only fuels people like Khomeini. Between the secret police and the religious mullahs, people choose the mullahs.

Photograph 10: This is a reproduction of an propagandistic oil painting showing Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi in a courageous pose with his army uniform and medals.

Kapuscinski emphasizes that domestic affairs are actually a secondary concern of the Shah's: his first love, and the instrument that keeps him in power, is his army. The Shah subscribes to every American gun and weaponry magazine, and buys every weapon that suits his fancy. The Americans also supply the Shah's army with many weapons to keep him in power.

Daguerreotypes, pages 61 to 78

Daguerreotypes, pages 61 to 78 Summary and Analysis

Photograph 11: A photograph of a Lufthansa airliner. Members of the Shah's retinue regularly take a plane to Munich just to have lunch. Higher-up members prefer not to travel but instead to have lunch flown in by Air France. Corruption and waste reign supreme in the Shah's "Great Civilization." Bribery in the area of hundreds of millions of dollars becomes just another part of doing business for corporations in Iran. This great wealth and corruption gives rise to a class of people Kapuscinski refers to as "petro-bourgeoisie," a class of freeloaders, created by oil wealth, who produce nothing but consume everything. They build grand million-dollar mansions next to shantytowns, flaunting their wealth. Naturally, this all contributes to the lower class's increasing hostility.

Photograph 12: This is a political cartoon which shows a Teheran street full of large American cars, with ordinary Iranians on the sidewalk with puzzled looks holding only parts of cars—a door handle or fan belt. The Shah promises that every Iranian will own a car in his new society, and the cartoon is critical of this notion, implying that ordinary Iranians only get empty promises.

From the Notes 6: Kapuscinski explains the creation of the Shiite wing of the Muslim faith. The Prophet Mohammed died, and there became a struggle over succession. The Shiites backed Ali, Mohammed's son-in-law and father to Mohammed's grandsons, while the majority Sunnis backed other candidates. Ali is soon after assassinated, one grandson is poisoned to death and the other dies in battle, leaving no clear heir to Mohammed and allowing the Sunnis to elect their caliphs, or rulers. The Shiites consider this a grave injustice, which is how the current schism in Islam came to be. The Shiites have been a persecuted minority for many centuries, and undergo a diaspora because of their persecution. They eventually find kindred spirits in the Iranians, who also have a long history of oppression and tyranny. Iranians' adoption of the Shiite faith is a kind of rebellion, a resistance. In fact, Kapuscinski traces modern terrorism to Iranian Shiites waging war against their oppressors. Simultaneously, Iran becomes a hotbed of religious fanaticism and ultra-left orthodoxy.

Shiites reject the rule of the caliph, instead looking centuries backward to Ali's family line, the imams. The last imam, they contend, hid in a cave in the year 878, and never died. This is Mohammed, the twelfth imam. Shiites believe the Twelfth Imam will reappear from hiding bearing the title of Mahdi (the one led by God) to establish a righteous kingdom on earth. This is the only authority extreme Shiites bow to. To a lesser degree they listen to their religious leaders, the ayatollahs.

The mosque develops into a key sanctuary for the Iranian Shiite. Even the Shah's influence is limited within the walls of the mosque. The Shah may persecute ayatollahs,

but even he must appear to be a devout Muslim. Shiites can discuss politics and the news of the day in the mosque. Around the social/political aspects of the mosque there develops the bazaar, which in addition to a religious and social gathering place, offers a selection of goods and food.

Daguerreotypes, pages 78 to 90

Daguerreotypes, pages 78 to 90 Summary and Analysis

From the Notes: Mahmud Azari is introduced, a man who flees from the Savak to live in London for eight years but who returns to Iran in 1977 at the request of his brother.

In those eight years, Azari is stunned to see how Teheran has transformed from a small desert oasis to a sprawling metropolis of five million people. Azari also feels the people have become harsher, ruder and more aggressive. He is told he has to report to the secret police shortly after he returns, and he goes to the police station to nervously answer a questionnaire.

Azari learns that his brother is a revolutionary who speaks against the Shah. The brother hands Azari illegal revolutionist literature written by Ali Asqara Jawadi. Azari reads it, and then is fearful of being discovered with it.

Azari tracks down old acquaintances—those who haven't left the country or been jailed. None are the same in the oppression of Iran. A botany professor acquaintance obsesses over his plants and refuses to talk politics. A mayor boasts about his new factories or infrastructures, but cannot put into words the general feeling of discontent. Azari says that new Iran is confident in its new concrete and buildings, but if Iranians are pressed to look beyond the concrete and into thoughts, feelings, measuring happiness, etc., they are alarmed and defensive. Another acquaintance has become a poet praising the Shah with his every poem, while another friend, previously jailed and tortured, has lost all life and soul.

Later, three men approach Azari in his apartment and ask if he is a member of the Shah's political party. Azari responds he is apolitical, but joining is not an option. So after a day, Azari joins the political party, and is soon invited to a meeting to prepare for the Shah's thirty-seventh anniversary of being the ruler, an event full of propaganda and feasts. Afterwards, Azari talks with a writer who is proud of getting the Savak to publish a very minor poem that mentions "sorrow," a forbidden term amid such national optimism.

Daguerreotypes, pages 91 to 100

Daguerreotypes, pages 91 to 100 Summary and Analysis

From the Notes (continued): Azari senses the stirrings of revolution. Later that year, the Shah is forced by Americans to release some intellectuals from prison. This is seen as the Shah showing weakness. There are also secret meetings beginning to be held to try to revive the dissolved Iranian Writers' Association. Azari attends these meetings and meets those who have been imprisoned. After a meeting one night, the Savak agents discover them and beat Azari, his brother, and the other meeting members. Azari gets stitches in his head and must remain in bed. The newspaper reports a distorted version of the events of the beating, with the Savak looking saintly.

Some time later, Azari feels safe enough to take a walk around town, but he suffers a paranoid hallucination that he is being followed, causing him to run for his life even though no one is behind him. Fear grips him, and it grips all of Iran. A wild horse causes a riot against the police in one town, and in Teheran the police conduct a raid on the university, arresting several students and teachers. Finally, one night Azari is awakened by his brother and informed of a massacre that occurred in Qom, where police opened fired and killed five hundred people who were rioting over a news item that was critical of ayatollah Khomeini.

The Dead Flame, pages 101 to 115

The Dead Flame, pages 101 to 115 Summary and Analysis

Kapuscinski believes the usually reasons for revolution—poverty, oppression, abuses—are not truly the cause for revolution, at least the Iranian revolution. Revolution is caused by the uncontrolled word, and the realm of ideas is the most dangerous for the dictator.

Revolution is spontaneous, a drama. It is so rare because humans avoid that which is uncomfortable, until they have no other choice. The people must be badgered to the point of exhaustion to commence a revolution.

There are two types of revolutions: revolution by assault, and revolution by siege. Revolution by assault seeks immediate violent remedy for perceived wrongs. There is a sudden action and then events calm down. By contrast, revolution by siege starts with small events and few people, but builds into a great crescendo. Revolutions by siege are much more permanent.

Authority causes revolution by its own sense of invincibility and perceived freedom to commit any wrongs upon the people.

Kapuscinski pinpoints the exact moment of the start of the Iranian revolution as January 8, 1978, when the unflattering article about ayatollah Khomeini is released in the government newspaper Etelat. The Shah portrays Khomeini as an outsider and a foreigner (Khomeini's grandfather was of Indian descent). Because Khomeini is a foreigner, the article reasons, he cannot be trusted. The article simultaneously points out that the status quo is perfect, and because Khomeini is an enemy of the status quo, he must be a madman.

Reaction to this article starts in Khomeini's home town of Qom. People begin to congregate in large groups (which is against the Shah's orders) to vent frustrations and read the article aloud for the illiterates. Kapuscinski pinpoints the moment of resistance to an unnamed citizen and policeman, to drive home the point that revolution starts at the individual level. The policeman demands the citizens disperse on threat of violence or imprisonment. Usually fear has worked, for fear is the best weapon of the police state. However, in this instance, the citizen has lost his fear. Fear is no longer the controlling emotion. The citizen has become indifferent to the policeman's threat. And this is revolution. The history books discuss revolutions in terms of dictatorial abuses and oppression, but they neglect this key psychological aspect to the event.

This unnamed policeman returns to his post, reports to his supervisor, and eventually the order is given to open fire on the crowd. There is panic, many flee, and some die in the central square of Qom. After the violence is over, the dead are wrapped in sheets

and prayed over. The next day, there is a commemoration held for the dead. This commemoration is tinged not only with the pain of loss, but a thirst for revenge.

Next examined is why so many world revolutions seem to urge a retreat to the old ways and old customs, as embodied in Khomeini and his fundamentalism. Kapuscinski believes that a return to tradition is a kind of comfort to people stripped of so many freedoms. They retreat and seek shelter inwardly, looking to the past rather than risking a view into the future.

The massacre at Qom starts a series of commemorations in towns all over Iran that become protests. The dead are mourned every forty days, and so, almost like clockwork, forty days after a massacre, people gather to remember and also to protest, and this turns into another massacre that builds momentum for another protest in forty days' time. Tabriz, Isfahan, and finally Teheran are sites of further massacres.

The Dead Flame, pages 116 to 131

The Dead Flame, pages 116 to 131 Summary and Analysis

The Shah's response to increasing violence is predictable: show military strength and use violence and the police to beat the people into submission. The Shah, like all dictators, "believes that man is an abject creature" (p. 115), and so is surprised when Iranians show such strength and courage despite massacre after massacre.

The Shah holds a parade in support of himself in Tabriz, and dismisses the revolutionists as a mere handful of people. He fires a few officers in his army as an empty gesture of support for the people, and then orders a massacre at Isfahan to appease angry members of the army. The Shah is trying to play to all sides, and he is losing. He acts impulsively out of panic, and does not develop a larger strategy.

Kapuscinski fast-forwards a bit to December 1978. Kapuscinski decides to visit the U.S. Embassy to celebrate the New Year. He walks through the city of Teheran, a shell of its former self with burned-out buildings and empty streets. The Embassy itself is also a ghost town, having been stormed earlier that year. Two revolutionary guards are stationed at the gate, and beyond Kapuscinski can seen a lighted building where American hostages are being held.

On the television, dozens of pro-revolution films are being shown on government stations. These films begin very much the same, showing throngs of protesters shouting "Death to the Shah!" Then, the army arrives with tanks and guns, but the crowd is unperturbed and continues to march forward to death. Many wear white to signal they are unafraid of death. The final "act" of these films is after the violence, when dead bodies line the streets and survivors are wailing over family members.

One such films is particularly memorable, showing a massacre at Isfahan when a legless invalid in a wheelchair is struggling to turn his wheel to escape the street as bullets whiz past him. Finally this man is the only one left, and soldiers murder him. The dead body remains in the center of the square, sitting upright in the chair, "like a public monument" (p. 126).

Kapuscinski recalls a spontaneous march he himself is involved in, on the main thoroughfare of Engelob, which starts with a single man with a beautiful voice singing about Allah as he walks down the street. Children and then others join, to the point where a hundred people are singing along as they march. Kapuscinski comes to anticipate marches by visiting a favorite street vendor. If the vendor displays his wares, the day will be peaceful, but if he hides the wares there will be a demonstration, because the vendor does not wish his goods to be trampled.

Next discussed is a typical victim of the revolution, nine-year-old Razak, who works from four in the morning until nine at night making bread in an oven. He is the sole support for his family in a faraway village, but he misses his mother and returns to her. It is only temporary, because he must return to Teheran to continue to support his mother and many siblings. He has trouble finding work, and joins the great mass of unemployed in a place called Gomruk Square.

Massive strikes happen in late 1978, and still the Shah is pent up in his royal palace, refusing to budge.

The Dead Flame, pages 131 to 152

The Dead Flame, pages 131 to 152 Summary and Analysis

Kapuscinski uses an extended metaphor to compare the Shah to the producer/director/star of his own play, The Great Civilization. The Shah puts on a grand play and wishes to amaze and impress his audience, and all sorts of extras (lured by riches) are invited on stage with him. Props and scenery from all over the world are brought in. The Shah spends all his time on the stage and neglects the ground floor, where people are unhappy, exploited, and oppressed. His audience (the Iranians) do not recognize this strange play, and so they abandon it for one of the only things that still makes sense and has meaning, religion, as embodied in the mosque. Revolt (revolution) occurs, which in the play metaphor is akin to people forgetting their lines or stagehands forgetting what actions to take. The Shah's grand vision is overwhelmed by his extras.

Next, an interview is reprinted involving a man who has been a sort of professional wrecker of monuments erected to the Shah since the original Shah abdicated his throne in 1941. The man speaks of the expertise required in pulling down monuments with rope, and how he considered it his duty to pull down many hundreds of monuments the Shahs erected to themselves.

Khomeini returns to Iran, first to Teheran then to Qom. He is hailed as a conquering hero. There is a great euphoria, a swelling of intense emotion that even grips Kapuscinski. Subsequently, Kapuscinski then speaks of the inevitable letdown after the revolution is over, akin to a depression, in which revolutionaries find they must return to the mundane workaday world.

Signs of the revolution start to vanish. There are no more crowds. Rule transfers to "committees" run by new, untested men who do not know how to lead. Those who make the best speeches rise to the greatest positions of power. Much speech making and only little actual ruling is accomplished. Kapuscinski compares the Iranian revolution to the many others he has reported on, in respect to its sense of ignorance. No one knows what to do or how to lead after the smoke clears.

The new order begins to resemble the old one. Everywhere there is ignorance, bureaucracy, wasted effort. Uneducated, illiterate people have taken the reins of power, and just when they will begin to learn their trade, they will be replaced by another way of the uneducated. Newcomers have great ambition and energy, but little skill or know-how.

One thing the committees can agree on is public executions of Shah loyalists. Europe expresses outrage at this executions, but Kapuscinski sees them as just a continuing chapter in a country enraptured in the concept of revenge. The sight of blood does

something different to these Iranians than it does to Europeans. The two cultures could not be more different.

The revolution reveals itself to be divided in two camps. There are more progressive leaders that wish to establish a European-style democracy, and there are conservative hardliners who wish to establish a theocracy, an Islamic republic. Bani Sadr leads the progressives, and a man called Beheshti leads the conservatives. It's clear from the beginning that the people back the conservatives and that the conservatives will win out.

Beheshti's men begin attacking students and other "counterrevolutionaries," and oppression begins anew. The revolutionary, when given the chance, will become the dictator, and the cycle never stops. The intelligentsia begin to fear crowds again; history is repeating itself.

Kapuscinski ends with an anecdote from a Persian carpet salesman named Mr. Ferdousi. Ferdousi believes that spirituality and noble ideals like beauty have kept the Persian people alive and vibrant through so much calamity, and that the Persian people will never be defeated because they will never lose their spirituality.

Characters

Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi

Pahlavi is the last Shah of Iran, and by the end of the book is forced to flee the country in February of 1979 amidst revolution. He is the son of Shah Reza Khan, a larger-than-life ruler. In some ways, Pahlavi struggled to emerge from his father's shadow, and never succeeded in doing so. Kapuscinski points to an early photograph of Pahlavi as proof of this psychology, contrasting physically imposing and confident Reza Khan with his pale and frail son Pahlavi.

Reza Khan is stripped of his power by the West in 1941, and Pahlavi is made Shah of Iran at twenty-two. He is forced to flee in the early 1950s to Rome when liberal politician Doctor Mossadegh stages a minor coup in a bid to nationalize the country's oil. Pahlavi is reinstalled in 1953 by Western powers.

Pahlavi rules with an iron fist, using his secret police, Savak, to compel loyalty to the monarchy at the threat of torture or imprisonment. Pahlavi is portrayed as hopelessly out of touch with his people. In 1973, he announces a substantial raise of Iranian oil, the profits of which he funnels into a great public works and modernization project, the Great Civilization. The Great Civilization is a spectacular failure, and only accelerates Pahlavi's demise.

When Iranians tire of the Shah's dictatorial swagger and "might makes right" attitude, riots begin in 1978. Pahlavi responds with more of the same violence and intimidation tactics, but this time they do not work, and by early 1979, the chaos and violence force him to flee his country.

Ayatollah Khomeini

Khomeini is one of the ayatollahs, the highest religious leaders of the Shiite Muslim faith. He comes from the Iranian town of Qom and lives a very simple life there in a hut with very few possessions. His grand vision for Iran is that of an Islamic republic, a state run according to religious law, and he succeeds in creating just that after being declared Supreme Leader of Iran following the 1979 revolution.

Khomeini begins his dissent in the early 1960s, partly in response to what he perceives as the Shah's attachment to the West. Khomeini is very conservative and believes that Iran should isolate itself from the rest of the world and especially the West, because the West is a corrupting influence.

Khomeini combines persistence and a shrewd public persona as the leader of the revolution. Even in exile, he is able to effectively lead the call for the Shah's exit from the throne. While other ayatollahs wrote books or engaged in intellectual debates with other religious leaders, Khomeini brought his message directly to the people, and this is

the reason for his success. Many of his followers call him Imam Khomeini, and believe him to be the Twelfth Imam. In the Shiite faith, the Twelfth Imam is said to have retreated underground centuries ago, and is prophesied to emerge from hiding to lead the world into a new era of religious devotion. Khomeini does not discourage this legend, and when the Shah leaves, Khomeini is the logical choice to become Supreme Leader, a post which translates into the highest government as well as highest religious position in Iran.

Shah Reza Khan

Reza Khan is the father of Mohammed Reza Pahlavi. A career soldier turned politician, Reza Khan was an imposing and intimidating man whose support of Hitler during World War II led to the abdication of his throne in 1941 to son Pahlavi.

Doctor Mossadegh

Doctor Mossadegh is a liberal politician who manages to temporarily wrest power from Shah Pahlavi in 1951, attaining the title of Prime Minister. He nationalizes the country's oil, angering Western oil interests and leading to his being forcibly removed from power, allowing Shah Pahlavi to resume his monarchy.

The Petro-Bourgeoisie

The Shah's great oil wealth creates a class of sycophants trying to siphon off a bit of the new wealth for themselves. These upper-class freeloaders are referred to Kapuscinski as the petro-bourgeoisie.

Mahmud Azari

Azari is an intellectual who initially escaped the Shah's Savak in 1969 but who returns to Iran in 1977 at his brother's urging. He becomes caught up in the revolutionary cause. He develops severe paranoia because of the potential punishment his activities warrant.

Savak

Savak are the Shah's secret police. They enforce loyalty to the Shah, and disloyal citizens are subject to torture and death. Their many headquarters are hidden, and they operate with relative impunity.

Razak

Razak is a poor nine-year-old boy from a distant village who comes to Teheran in order to support his family from work. He works seventeen hours a day baking bread to support his mother and many siblings. Later, he is unable to find work and joins the great masses of unemployed in the city square.

The Monument Destroyer

An interview with a monument destroyer is one of the lighter moments in the book. An unnamed revolutionary describes how he has been pulling statues of the Shahs down with ropes since Shah Reza Khan was deposed in 1941. He has pulled down hundreds of statues, and explains that there is an expert technique necessary for proper monument destruction.

Mr. Ferdousi

Mr. Ferdousi is a Persian carpet salesman who is a favorite of the author's. Mr. Ferdousi is upbeat despite the violence of the revolution, and believes that his people's spirituality and noble ideals are enough to see them through most any calamity.

Objects/Places

Teheran

Teheran (or Tehran) is the capital city of Iran, and the site of the Shah's royal palace where he resides and rules from. The author spends much of his time operating out of a Tehran hotel room. Under the Shah, Teheran transforms from a small desert oasis into a bustling city of five million people.

Qom

Qom is a small city to the south of Teheran. It is home to many of the most fundamental and conservative Shiites in Iran, and it is the hometown of Khomeini. Rioting that ushers in the revolution first takes place in Qom.

Trans-Iranian Railway

During World War II, Shah Reza Khan admires Hitler and eventually refuses to allow Allied forces to use Iran's railroad to transfer supplies to and from the Soviet Union. This situation is intolerable to the Allies, and so Shah Reza Khan is deposed and his son Mohammed Reza Pahlavi is installed as Shah.

Oil

As an important natural resource, oil accounts for much of the wealth—and much of the strife—in the Middle East. Oil is a kind of dream for the average poor Middle Easterner who hopes to become rich, but in reality much of Middle Eastern oil is controlled by foreign interest. In other cases, only a very small percentage of the rich enjoy the wealth that oil production provides.

The Frying Pan

The frying pan is a nickname for a torture device frequently used by Savak. It involves strapping the victim down to an electrically heated table.

Great Civilization

The Great Civilization is Shah Pahlavi's ambitious plan to use oil profits to modernize Iran and develop its infrastructure. The movement goes awry, and waste and corruption are hallmarks of the plan, although some parts of Iran do benefit with added infrastructure like highways.

Shiism

Shiism is one of two branches of the Islamic faith. Most Iranians are Shiites. Shiism believes that Ali, the Prophet Mohammed's son-in-law, is the rightful successor to Mohammed, and that caliphs coming after him are illegitimate. They await the day when the Twelfth Imam will reveal himself to lead the world. To many, this Twelfth Imam was Khomeini.

Mosque

During the Shah's oppressive regime, the mosque becomes one of the few places where people could congregate, air their grievances, and discuss the news of the day. It is a sanctuary to many where the secret police's power is limited.

Etelat

Etelat is a government-sponsored Iranian newspaper that advances the Shah's cause. A January 8, 1978 article denouncing Khomeini incites the people of Qom to riot, starting the Iranian revolution.

U.S. Embassy in Teheran

During the Iranian revolution, the U.S. Embassy is overrun by revolutionaries, and dozens of Americans are taken prisoner within the embassy compound, a situation known as the Iranian hostage crisis.

Engelob

Engelob is a main thoroughfare in Tehran, which is the frequent site of protests and demonstrations in the later stages of the Iranian revolution.

Committees

After the Shah's authority crumbles, local governance is left to committees led by revolutionaries. These men (in Kapuscinski's opinion) are ill-equipped to lead, and the committees display the same kind of incompetence that marked the Shah's rule.

Themes

History Repeats Itself

The historical context Kapuscinski establishes conveys a sense that the history of Iran—and to a larger extent, the Middle East—is cyclical. Violence results in revenge, which results in more violence. In this sense, the Shah's oppressive secret police and violation of human rights are just an extension of violence committed by the Shahs before him, as with Agha Mohammed Khan, who orders the entire population of the city of Kerman to be murdered or blinded. The blinded children of Kerman survive to sow seeds of hate in Iranians, stirring notions of revenge that perpetuate the violence. Overall, the revenge narrative is very strong in the Iranian people, and helps to explain how the revolution was possible.

At the end of the book, there is also a sense that the revolution will only bring more of the same misery and oppression to Iran. Kapuscinski remarks upon the inept new leaders and how they might just as easily become the same kind of ineffective, bloated bureaucracy that characterized the Shah's monarchy. Also, just as with the Shah, the conservative revolutionary leaders begin to persecute professors and students, including raiding a university just as the Shah was known to do. The revolution will only bring a new dictatorship, which depends on the same kind of ignorance and fear that the Shah depended upon to rule.

The Shah was Out of Touch

One of the many reasons for the 1979 revolution, as Kapuscinski portrays it, involves the Shah being out of touch with the common Iranian. To show this, Kapuscinski uses an elaborate metaphor involving the Shah as the director and star of his own play. The Shah incorporates elaborate props and scenery and puts on a grand show, which impresses the many extras he has hired to appear with him. These extras represent both the members of the petro-bourgeoisie he creates as well as Western governments and Western media. However, the Shah does not impress the people on the ground floor, the common Iranians. These people do not understand what the Shah is trying to accomplish, although they realize that, whatever it is, it will not benefit them.

Outside of this metaphor, examples abound of the Shah's estrangement from his own people. He is a hermit in his own royal palace and knows only life within those walls, never venturing outside to see how his people work and live. He depends upon Western powers—such as when the West deposes Prime Minister Doctor Mossadegh—at a time when the common citizen wishes to reduce foreign influence. He imports a huge amount of raw material and technology into Iran as part of his vision of the Great Civilization, but the country doesn't have the infrastructure to process this influx of material, so billions of dollars are wasted. Plus, the Shah obsesses with his military, and (as Kapuscinski portrays him) the monarch would much rather outfit his army with the

latest and greatest military weapon or gadget than provide basic services to his impoverished people.

Why Khomeini Emerged

The author offers several reasons why Khomeini emerged as the leader of the revolution. Although there were better known and better educated ayatollahs at the time before and during the Iranian revolution, Khomeini enjoyed the popular support of the people. Instead of writing obscure tomes or engaging in intellectual debates within religious circles, Khomeini took his message directly to the people, particularly to the conservative citizens of his hometown of Qom, who were especially receptive.

Khomeini's message was simple—the Shah must go—and his message never altered in fifteen years or more of rebellion on Khomeini's part. Kapuscinski believes that the simplicity of the message, and Khomeini's persistence in delivering the same message again and again also contributed to his popularity.

Khomeini was of course very conservative. Kapuscinski's experience with revolutions around the world show that revolutionary leaders usually look backwards, stirring popular sentiment by wishing to return to old ways and old customs that are perceived to be superior to the new and unwanted ways of the present government. Khomeini preached for the formation of an Islamic republic, a theocracy, and this idea energized people who found comfort in religion amidst the oppression of the Shah's regime. Khomeini also preached for a cessation to foreign influence within Iran, and this stance, by contrast to the Shah, who was seen as the West's puppet, resonated with Iranians.

Lastly, the persona Khomeini developed contributed to his popularity. He "practiced what he preached" and lived very simply in a hut in Qom. There was also a sort of mythic quality to the man, with only very few photographs of him as a young man. It is as if he had emerged fully-formed as a wise old man. This led many to believe he was the Twelfth Imam of prophecy, destined to create a religious kingdom on Earth.

Style

Perspective

Author Ryszard Kapuscinski combines a certain journalistic insistence on objectivity and factual reporting with his own personal reflections and commentary. By the time of his coverage of the Iranian revolution, Kapuscinski had decades of experience as a foreign reporter in countries around the world, and he had particular experience covering coups, revolts, and revolutions, especially in third-world countries. This experience allows Kapuscinski to relate the events of the Iranian revolution to the other revolutions he has covered. For example, he sees the lack of leadership after the revolution as symptomatic of revolutions in general.

Ryszard Kapuscinski's keen grasp of the history of the region allows him to ground the revolution in a historical context. For example, he notes the peculiarities of the Iranian people, and reasons for why they may have so readily embraced the Shiite branch of Muslim faith. He also traces a long history of violence in the region, as with previous Shahs ordering massacres that would be eerily repeated during the revolution by Shah Pahlavi. It is clear that Kapuscinski believes that the past strongly influences the present, especially in a region like the Middle East, where modern technology coexists with centuries-old religious beliefs.

Though a journalist, Kapuscinski allows himself to get personally involved in the events of the revolution to a certain degree. He admits that he finds the day-to-day riots and danger thrilling, and he admits to a subsequent letdown, verging on a depression, when the revolution is over and people return to their everyday lives.

Tone

Kapuscinski's tone is often one of bemusement, of confusion. He is very close to the revolution and has been involved in the day-to-day ebb and flow of events for years. Many events are still fresh in his mind, and this volume represents the author's attempt to find some meaning, some overarching theme amidst the pandemonium of revolution. While making sweeping conclusions in some cases, as with his ruminations on the nature of revolution, at other times he volunteers information and leaves any conclusion for the audience to formulate.

As a foreigner, and as a journalist, Kapuscinski does maintain at least some semblance of distance from his subject. He does not betray sympathies with either side of the revolution, and he does not really have an interest in persuading the reader of a particular position. Instead, he notes the similarities between the revolutionary government and the Shah's monarchy, implying that there is little difference between the two and that history is repeating itself. Kapuscinski's interest is both historical and personal. He is interested in the root causes of the revolution and spends a significant

amount of pages exploring these causes. At the same time, he also takes time to look at the human cost of the conflict. He relates several personal stories—for example, the educated refugee Mahmud Azari and the poor child-worker Razak—in an attempt to portray the struggle of everyday Iranians.

Structure

Shah of Shahs is, overall, quite fragmented and nonlinear. The author admits at the beginning of the volume to a certain degree of chaos, overwhelmed as he is with the mess of scribbled notes, audio recordings, photographs, and other media he has collected in his haphazard hotel room. Appropriately, the book itself is similarly haphazard. The narrative begins with the author ready to leave Iran after the 1979 revolution has calmed down. Then, by examining photographs or looking at notes, Kapuscinski turns back the clock to establish a historical framework in which the revolution took place, starting with the last Shah's grandfather and working forward to the 1979 revolution.

The book is divided into three parts. The first section, "Cards, Faces, Fields of Flowers," establishes post-revolution Iran and explains the author's purpose in writing the book. The second section, "Daguerreotypes," involves Kapuscinski examining specific photographs or notes he has in his collection and using these items as a springboard for placing the revolution in a historical context. The third section, "The Dead Flame," is a disjointed collection of thoughts about the nature of revolution, and the Iranian revolution in particular. In this third section, Kapuscinski also establishes somewhat of a timeline for recent events up to and including the Shah's exile and the storming of the U.S. Embassy which results in American hostages being taken.

Overall, there is a strong sense that Kapuscinski is doing his best to make sense of the revolution, but that not enough time has elapsed to provide a certain necessary detachment and organization. He is juggling jumbled impressions and thoughts, and so the narrative is frequently noncohesive.

Quotes

"Every power has its own dynamics, its own domineering, expansionist tendencies, its bullying obsessive need to trample the weak. This is the law of power, as everyone knows. But what can the weaker ones do? They can only fence themselves off, afraid of being swallowed up [...]"
Cards, Faces, Fields of Flowers, p. 9

"But apart from his cruelty, greed, and outlandishness, the old Shah [Reza] deserves credit for saving Iran from the dissolution that threatened after the First World War. In his efforts to modernize the country he built roads and railways, schools and offices, airports and new residential quarters in the cities."
Daguerreotypes: Photograph 3, p. 24

"Such a man [Doctor Mossadegh] can't be erased from people's memories; so he can be thrown out of office but never out of history. The memory is a private possession to which no authority has access."
Daguerreotypes: Cassette 1, p. 33

"[A]ll walls can have ears and every door or gate can lead to the secret police [Savak]. Whoever fell into the grip of that organization disappeared without a trace, sometimes forever."
Daguerreotypes: Photograph 7, p. 44

"Development is a treacherous river, as everyone who plunges into its currents knows. On the surface the water flows smoothly and quickly, but if the captain makes one careless or thoughtless move he finds out how many whirlpools and wide shoals the river contains."
Daguerreotypes: Photograph 9, p. 56

"And so, in plain sight of a silent and increasingly hostile people, the new class mounts an exhibition of the Iranian dolce vita, knowing no measure in its dissoluteness, rapacity, and cynicism. This provokes a fire in which the class itself, along with its creator and protector, will perish."
Daguerreotypes, Photograph 11, p. 66

"The whole life of the empire flowed from anniversary to anniversary in an unctuous, ornate, dignified rhythm with the solemn and resplendent celebration of each date connected to the Shah and his outstanding achievements: the White Revolution and the

Great Civilization."
Daguerreotypes: From the Notes, p. 88

"[B]y carrying that fear inside I'd involuntarily become part of a system founded on fear. A terrible, yet indissoluble, relation, a sort of pathological symbiosis, had established itself between me and the dictator. Through my fear I was supporting a system I hated."
Daguerreotypes: From the Notes, pp. 94-95

"Here [the Middle East] it is different, here the past is as alive as the present, the unpredictable cruel Stone Age coexists with the calculating, cool age of electronics—the two eras live in the same man, who is as much the descendant of Genghis Khan as he is the student of Edison."
Daguerreotypes: From the Notes, pp. 98-99

"Fear: a predatory, voracious animal living inside us. It does not let us forget it's there. It keeps eating at us and twisting our guts. It demands food all the time, and we see that it gets the choicest delicacies."
The Dead Flame, p. 110

"In every revolution, a movement grapples with a structure. The movement attacks the structure, trying to destroy it, while the structure defends itself and tries to extinguish the movement."
The Dead Flame, p. 130

"A dictatorship depends for its existence on the ignorance of the mob; that's why all dictators take such pains to cultivate that ignorance."
The Dead Flame, p. 150

Topics for Discussion

What moment does Kapuscinski pinpoint as the precise moment the Iranian Revolution started in earnest?

What was the Shah attempting with his Great Civilization as described? How did this eventually contribute to the Iranian Revolution?

What typical methods did Savak employ to terrorize the citizens of Iran?

Despite the existence of better-known and better-educated ayatollahs, why is Ayatollah Khomeini successful as the revolution's leader in Kapuscinski's opinion?

Why does Kapuscinski feel the Iranian people were especially primed to adopt the Shiite faith?

Why is Shah Reza Khan forced from his throne during World War II?

Who is Doctor Mossadegh and what is his role in the history of Iran?