

Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran

The **Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran** was the Allied invasion of the Imperial State of Iran during World War II, by British, Commonwealth, and Soviet armed forces. The invasion from August 25 to September 17, 1941 was codenamed *Operation Countenance*. The purpose was to secure Iranian oil fields and ensure Allied supply lines (see *Persian Corridor*) for the Soviets fighting against Axis forces on the Eastern Front. Though Iran was officially neutral, its monarch was friendly toward the Axis Powers: he was deposed during the subsequent occupation and replaced with his young son.

Background

Following Germany's invasion of the USSR in June 1941, the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union became Allies. Although still a neutral nation, Reza Shah Pahlavi had brought Iran closer to Germany.^[1] This concerned the British who feared that the Abadan Oil Refinery, owned by the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, might fall into German hands — the refinery produced eight million tons of oil in 1940 and was thus a crucial part of the Allied war effort. For the Soviets, Iran was a country of extreme strategic importance. The German Army (*Heer*) was steadily advancing through the Soviet Union and the Persian Corridor was one of the few ways for the Allies to get desperately needed Lend-Lease supplies to the Soviets from the United States.

As increasing U-boat attacks and poor ice conditions made convoys to Arkhangelsk extremely dangerous, the Trans-Iranian Railway seemed a very attractive route to transport supplies up from the Persian Gulf. The two Allied nations applied pressure on Iran and the Shah, but this led only to increased tensions and pro-German rallies in the capital of Tehran. Reza Shah refused the Allies' requests to expel German nationals residing in Iran, and denied the use of the railway to the Allies; this, along with the above strategic concerns, prompted Britain and the Soviet Union to launch an invasion of Iran on August 25, 1941. However according to the British embassy reports from Tehran in 1940, the total number of German citizens in Iran - from technicians to spies - was no more than a thousand.^[2]



Reza Shah Pahlavi

Invasion

The invasion was rapid and conducted with ease. From the south the British Iraq Command (also known as Iraqforce), renamed six days later as the *Persia and Iraq Command* (Paiforce), under the command of Lieutenant General Edward Quinan, advanced. Paiforce was made up of the 8th and 10th Indian Infantry Divisions, 2nd Indian Armoured Brigade, 4th British Cavalry Brigade (later renamed 9th Armoured Brigade) and the 21st Indian Infantry Brigade. The Soviets came from the north with their 44th, 47th and 53rd Armies of the Transcaucasian Front under General Kozlov. Air force and naval units also participated in the battle. The Iranian Army mobilised nine infantry divisions. Reza Shah appealed to US President Franklin Roosevelt under the Atlantic Charter:

"...on the basis of the declarations which Your Excellency has made several times regarding the necessity of defending principles of international justice and the right of peoples to liberty. I beg Your Excellency to take efficacious and urgent humanitarian steps to put an end to these acts of aggression. This incident brings into war a neutral and pacific country which has had no other care than the safeguarding of tranquillity and the reform of the country." — a letter of August 25

However, this plea failed to prompt a response from the US President to prevent the invasion of Iran, as Roosevelt's response shows:

"Viewing the question in its entirety involves not only the vital questions to which Your Imperial Majesty refers, but other basic considerations arising from Hitler's ambition of world conquest. It is certain that movements of conquest by Germany will continue and will extend beyond Europe to Asia, Africa, and even to the Americas, unless they are stopped by military force. It is equally certain that those countries which desire to maintain their independence must engage in a great common effort if they are not to be engulfed one by one as has already happened to a large number of countries in Europe. In recognition of these truths, the Government and people of the United States of America, as is well known, are not only building up the defenses of this country with all possible speed, but they have also entered upon a very extensive program of material assistance to those countries which are actively engaged in resisting German ambition for world domination."

Roosevelt also reassured the Shah by noting *"the statements to the Iranian Government by the British and Soviet Governments that they have no designs on the independence or territorial integrity of Iran"*. However, in 1945, the Soviets would be responsible for backing two breakaway territories in the north.

The campaign began on August 25 with a dawn attack by the British sloop HMS *Shoreham* on the harbour at Abadan. The Iranian sloop *Palang* was quickly sunk, and remaining ships were destroyed or captured. There had been no time to prepare resistance. The petroleum installations at Abadan were captured by two battalions from 8th Indian Division's 24th Indian Brigade making an amphibious crossing of the Shatt al-Arab from Basra.^[3] A small force was also landed at Bandar-e-Shahpur from the armed merchant cruiser HMAS *Kanimbla* to secure the port and petroleum terminal there. The Royal Air Force attacked airbases and communications. The 8th Indian Division (18th Brigade plus 25th Brigade under command from 10th Indian Division) advanced from Basra towards Qasr Shiekh (which was taken on August 25) and by August 28 had reached Ahvaz when the Shah ordered hostilities to cease.^[4]



Map of Iraq and western Iran in 1941

Further north, 8 battalions of British and Indian troops under Major-General William Slim advanced from Khanaqin (100 miles north east of Baghdad and 300 miles from Basra) into the Naft-i-Shah oilfield and on towards the Pai Tak Pass, leading towards Kermanshah and Hamadan. The Pai Tak position was taken on August 27 after the defenders had withdrawn in the night and the planned assault on Kermanshah on August 29 was aborted when the defenders called a truce to negotiate surrender terms.^[5]

The Soviets invaded from the north and advanced toward Maku, which had been softened up by bombing raids. There were also Soviet landings at Bandar-e Pahlavi, on the Caspian coast. In one incident, Soviet ships suffered from "friendly fire".

In naval actions, two Iranian warships were sunk and four crippled by the Royal Navy. Six Iranian fighters were shot down. Approximately 800 Iranian soldiers, sailors, airmen were killed, including Admiral Bayandor. Approximately 200 civilians died in Russian bombing raids in Gilan. British and Indian casualties were 22 killed and 42 wounded.

Without any military allies able to come to its assistance, Iranian resistance was rapidly overwhelmed and neutralised by Soviet and British tanks and infantry. The British and Soviet forces met at Senna (100 miles west of Hamadan) and Kazvin (100 miles west of Tehran and 200 miles north east of Hamadan) on August 30 and 31 respectively. Iran was defeated, the oilfields taken and the valuable Trans-Iranian Railway was in Allied hands. Because of lack of transport the British decided not to establish any forces beyond Hamadan and Ahvaz. In the meantime, the new Iranian Prime Minister, Foroughi, agreed that the German Minister and his staff should leave Tehran, the German, Italian, Hungarian and Romanian legations be closed and all remaining German nationals be handed over to the British and Soviet authorities. The failure to meet the last of these conditions led to British and

Soviet troops entering Tehran on September 17, the day after Reza Shah had been arrested and sent into exile in South Africa, leaving his son Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi to replace him on the throne. The Soviet and British forces withdrew from Tehran on October 17, after the Germans had been dealt with^[6] although Iran was effectively divided between Britain and the Soviet Union for the duration of the war.

Events during occupation

With this crucial supply route now open to the Soviet Union, the Persian Corridor would provide a massive flow of supplies (over 5 million tons of materiel) to the Soviets primarily, but also the British in the Middle East. The new Shah signed a Treaty of Alliance with Britain and the Soviet Union in January 1942, under which Iran provided nonmilitary assistance to the Allied war effort. Article Five of this treaty, although not entirely trusted by the Iranian leader, committed the Allies to leaving Iran "not more than six months after the cessation of hostilities". In September 1943, Iran declared war on Germany, thus qualifying for membership in the United Nations. At the Tehran Conference in November of that year, US President Franklin D. Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and General Secretary Joseph Stalin reaffirmed their commitment to Iran's independence and territorial integrity and displayed a willingness to extend economic assistance to Iran. The effects of the war, however, were very disruptive for Iran. Food and other essential items were scarce. Severe inflation imposed great hardship on the lower and middle classes.^[8]



Withdrawal

During the three years of occupation, Stalin had expanded Soviet political influence in Azerbaijan and the Kurdish area in northwestern Iran. On December 12, 1945, after weeks of violent clashes a Soviet-backed separatist People's Republic of Azerbaijan was founded. The Kurdish People's Republic was also established in late 1945. Iranian government troops sent to reestablish control were blocked by Soviet Red Army units. When the deadline for withdrawal arrived on March 2, 1946, six months after the end of World War II hostilities, the British began to withdraw, but Moscow balked, "citing threats to Soviet security."

Soviet troops did not withdraw from Iran proper until May, 1946 after receiving a promise of petroleum concessions. The Soviet-backed republics in the north were soon overthrown and the oil concessions were revoked.

Compensation demands

In 2009, the Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said that his country suffered during the invasions during World War II, and that he would "stand to the end" to get full compensation. He also said "We will seek compensation for World War II damages. I have assigned a team to calculate the costs, I will write a letter to the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon asking for Iran to be compensated for the damages. During this period, the Iranian people were subjected to a great deal of pressure and the country suffered a great deal of damages but Iran was not paid any compensation."^[9] ^[10] ^[11]

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External links

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