Murder in Tehran

Murder in Teheran

By Henry S. Villard

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When I entered the Foreign Service in 1928, Persia seemed as far away as the planet Jupiter, of very little interest to Americans, save for rug merchants, missionaries, archeologists, and an occasional venturesome tourist. My geography book showed an arid land of turbaned figures, mosques, primitive agriculture, and a feudal society almost medieval in its lack of transport and low standard of living. Rather at the end of the line was how one of my British colleagues described Teheran, then a sprawling city of 300,000 inhabitants.

I had set my heart on going to Melbourne or Stuttgart, naively assuming I would be granted one of my two post preferences. It was something of a shock to be assigned to the Persian capital instead, as vice-consul-in-charge of the consulate general—especially so because one of my predecessors, Robert W. Imbrie, had been savagely murdered by a howling mob foreshadowed the embassy seizure, but in this early case U.S. claims were satisfied.

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["The Journal" is a section for articles on diplomatic history and personal experiences by our readers relating to life in the Foreign Service.]

As part of my indoctrination in Near Eastern affairs, I was required to study the bulging file on the Imbrie case, mostly labeled confidential, a disconcerting reminder of the perils of a Persian assignment and certainly the most sensational episode in the history of U.S.-Iranian relations until the seizing of the embassy and the holding of its staff as hostages in 1979. There it all was—telegrams incoming and outgoing, diplomatic notes delivered and received, memoranda, letters, newspaper accounts. But instead of being published in Foreign Relations of the United States, as is customary after a lapse of 20 years, the documents—no longer classified—lie buried to this day in the National Archives for the simple reason that the Iranian government, for reasons of its own, never saw fit to give its consent to their release.

The half-forgotten story begins at 11 o'clock on the morning of July 18, 1924, when Vice Consul Imbrie ordered the carriage in which he was riding to stop at the Sakkeh Khaneh, a public drinking fountain that two weeks before had been declared the scene of a miraculous occurrence. Since then there had been numerous street demonstrations in which the Bahais, a minority sect, had been roundly denounced. Religious feeling was running high with the feast of

Muharram only two weeks away. But no order had been issued forbidding photographs, and Imbrie had no reason to anticipate danger as, camera in hand, he descended from the vehicle and approached the crowd around the fountain. He was accompanied by his kavass, or native messenger-interpreter, and another passenger named Seymour.

At the sight of the camera an angry murmur began to run through the crowd—foreigners were not only regarded by the ignorant with suspicion but were thought capable of any evil or mischief. Noting the throng's menacing attitude, a policeman came up to the feranghi and advised them to leave.

What happened next was like the touching of a match to tinder. It is probable that Imbrie, not a man to take unnecessary risks, closed his camera and the sound of it shutting was mistaken for the taking of a picture.

"They are Bahais!" shouted a fanatical cleric by the name of Seyid Hossein. "They have poisoned the waters of our sacred shrine and killed Moslem women and children!"

An Enraged Crowd

Instantly, the crowd set upon the Americans. Imbrie and Seymour managed to regain their carriage and make off at top speed, a screaming horde in pursuit. A mile or so further on, directly in front of military headquarters, their headlong flight was brought to a halt by two motorcycle police. Despite the frantic cries of a servant in the employ of Dr. H. P. Packard, a respected medical missionary, that Imbrie was not a Bahai but the American consul, the unfortunate men were dragged from the carriage and assaulted by a crowd that had now grown into the thousands. Although the city streets were generally well policed, not a single shot was fired in their defense; worse, among the leaders of the attack were cossack officers of Prime Minister Reza Khan's own Pahlavi regiment, whose sabers inflicted some of Imbrie's most serious injuries. In its fury the mob tore off the roof of a small tea house where the victims had found temporary refuge, then, harangued by the ringleader, broke into the police hospital to which they had been taken. Imbrie was on the operating table with more than 138 wounds when the assailants burst through the doors and windows and beat him to death with anything they could lay their hands on, including a chair and heavy tiles torn from the floor. Seymour, bludgeoned into unconsciousness, was left for dead in a room next door. The kavass, caught in the melee, had the American insignia and buttons ripped from his uniform but was otherwise unhurt.

'The Soviets Will Get Me'

Robert Whitney Imbrie, born in Washington on April 27, 1883, had an adventurous career, short though it was. A graduate of George Washington University and holder of a law degree from Yale, he distinguished himself as a much-decorated ambulance driver with the French army in World War I. Returning to the United States in 1917, he was offered an unusual appointment: vice consul and special representative at Petrograd and "other nearby points" in revolutionary Russia.

There he formed a lasting and deep-seated antipathy to the Bolsheviks. He was transferred to the border listening post of Viborg, Finland, in 1919, and in 1920 to Constantinople. The following year he was assigned to the office of Rear Admiral Mark L. Bristol, U.S. high commissioner to Turkey. There he met Katherine Gillespie of Boston, Massachusetts, director of the Near East Orphanage and intermediary between the Near East Relief Foundation and the nationalist government of Kemal Atatürk at Angora. The two were later married.

Imbrie next asked to be sent to Riga to report on the political, military, and economic situation in the Soviet Union. But the Communists had set a price upon his head. Soviet agents had sought to bribe the Turks with $40,000 in gold to let them do away with Imbrie, with the result that an armed guard was put around his car. "The Soviets will get me if there is any way of doing it," he was said to have told Lewis K. Davis, a consulting engineer in Turkey. An article in the Russkaya Gazeta, an anti-Soviet daily then being published in Leningrad, later said that Imbrie was regarded as one of the bitterest enemies of the Soviet republic, a man whom Moscow had intended to dispose of at the first opportunity.

The mission to Riga was considered too risky. Instead, Imbrie was ordered to Angora to report on conditions there and in Anatolia. He was a delegate at the 1923 Lausanne conference, which ended hostilities between Turkey and Greece after the former had driven out the Greek population of Smyrna.

There followed an assignment to Tabriz, another intelligence post on the Soviet border, but an irony of fate switched him at the last moment to Teheran, to take charge while Consul Bernard Gottlieb was on home leave.

At 7:22 p.m., Washington time, on the day of Imbrie's death a Very Urgent telegram from Joseph S. Kornfeld, American minister in Teheran, broke the news to a shocked Department of State. In the absence of Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes, Under Secretary Joseph C. Grew, a seasoned diplomat destined to be ambassador to Japan at the time of Pearl Harbor, was in charge of the department. Heading the division of Near Eastern affairs was 31-year old Allen W. Dulles, later to achieve fame as director of the Central Intelligence Agency. President Calvin Coolidge was in the White House. Their collective response in the crisis was swift and vigorous.

It was not the first time that an American had been murdered in Persia. A missionary named Larabee had been killed in 1904. Adequate justice had not been done; an indemnity had been paid and the culprits arrested but five of them had been allowed to escape. This time the government of the United States would make sure that appropriate action was taken and carried out. To start, Minister Kornfeld was instructed to underline the extreme gravity with which Washington viewed the slaying of its consular representative and to seek out every available fact bearing on the case—a difficult task because of the welter of conflicting evidence and because the legation, although not the consulate, was located at Zargundeh during the hot summer months. It was seven miles out of town and without a telephone. At the same time, Acting Secretary Grew warned

the Persian chargé d'affaires in Washington, Bagher M. Kazemi, that reparations would have to be made and nothing left undone to bring the guilty persons to full account.

While the State Department waited for a detailed report, the diplomatic corps in Teheran was under no such restraint. Martial law had been declared and a wave of apprehension was sweeping over the foreign colony. Two days after the murder the corps made strong representations to the prime minister. In a note signed by the Turkish ambassador as dean, and speaking for the governments of Afghanistan, the Soviet Union, Germany, France, and Italy, it expressed "profound horror" at the attack and charged that the mob's forcible entry into the police hospital proved that the authorities were either unwilling or unable to prevent the additional outrages there on Imbrie.

A Cossack's Condolences

The prime minister, the autocratic Reza Khan, had been an uneducated cossack officer who helped to overthrow the corrupt Kajar dynasty in 1921, making himself first minister of war, then prime minister, and in 1925 crowning himself Shah. Two days after the murder, accompanied by his foreign minister, Zoka-ol-Molk, he made an official call on Minister Kornfeld to convey condolences. Coincidentally, the foreign minister expressed regrets in a note of apology and explanation which, however, Kornfeld found "entirely inadequate." It blamed Imbrie for being careless in taking pictures and asserted that the police and military had made "extreme efforts" to rescue the Americans: several policemen had been injured, he said, three seriously, and one had died of his wounds. In the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, Kornfeld was unable to swallow these allegations and wired Washington that it was "perfectly preposterous" to say the military had offered resistance. Even Reza Khan, who had threatened to "cut the tongue out of any officer or man who opens his mouth about the tragedy," was soon compelled to back down in his efforts to protect the army's reputation.

Exactly one week after the killing, a telegram went out to the Teheran legation with the text of a forceful note for the Persian government. The United States not only insisted on full reparation and punishment for the guilty but it demanded that "assurances should be given and enforced of adequate protection for the lives of American citizens; and that the safety of its officials in Persia should be guaranteed." Furthermore, it demanded that the expenses should be covered of sending an American man-of-war to transport Imbrie's body to the United States; that a military guard of honor should be provided for the body while on Persian soil; and that appropriate honors should be rendered at the time of leaving Persian territory. Finally, in language that would have been singularly appropriate when the hostages were seized, it stressed that the "maintenance of relations between countries is primarily dependent upon the according of adequate protection to their respective nationals and to their official representatives." American relations with Persia had not been severed, but their continuance would depend upon the action the Persian government might take "to vindicate this fundamental principle of international law upon which

international intercourse is predicated."

Across the country, editorial opinion was solidly behind the firm tone of the American note. "For too long we have permitted the United States to be affronted by small and impotent countries," said the San Francisco Bulletin. It was not "the threat of a great power against a weak government," observed the Brooklyn Eagle "but the protest of an outraged people." American honor, declared the Springfield News, "must be protected wherever Americans travel or represent their country." The Minneapolis Tribune thought that "the mob spirit toward Americans is intolerable and must cease," while the Pittsburgh Times characterized the protest as "notice to the world that there can be no trifling with American rights, no disrespect to the American flag, no mistreatment of Americans anywhere." Private citizens appeared fully in accord. "Your stand and demand on Persia incident has a fundamental soundness to American homes," read one telegram to the secretary of state. "Would say step forth and let the world know that rights must be respected."

It didn't take long for the Persians to comply fully with the department's demands. On July 29, Zoka-ol-Molk, "extremely chagrined and depressed" by the incident, replied with positive assurances that the culprits would be apprehended and after their trial would receive drastic punishment. Though it would become worthless 55 years later, he pledged that the security of American citizens and particularly American official representatives would be "the explicit duty" of the government and that Persia would "make it in the future an essential point to respect the principles of international law." As it was, the Persians got off better than they expected. Within the week, the expression "moral victory" was being batted about Teheran, for the note was regarded as surprisingly lenient.

After two months of haggling, Persia paid to the United States in behalf of Mrs. Imbrie an indemnity of $60,000 (later increased by Congress to $90,000). For the cost of transporting Imbrie's body home it paid $110,000. In his message to Congress on February 17, 1925, President Coolidge proposed that this money should be spent for educational purposes. In 1950 it became a fund to educate Persian students in the United States. The hope was that the program would foster friendly relations between the two countries, but to the embittered widow of a man who had been murdered by Persians, it was understandably hard to take. Seymour, who survived the mob's violence, was paid $3,000 by Persia, largely for the purpose of defraying his hospital and medical expenses and the cost of his return to the United States.

Considerable pressure had to be applied by Washington, however, before Teheran produced three of the worst offenders, tried them by military tribunal, and sentenced them to death: a soldier named Morteza, the young son of a vendor, and Seyid Hossein, chief instigator of the attack. Executions were delayed, in part, because the court had recommended clemency, which carried special weight in respect to the convicted cleric. Reza Khan had no desire to antagonize the Shi'ite clergy, whose power, under the leadership of a senile old man named Seyid Hassan, was disturbingly on the increase. But Morteza paid the penalty on

October 2 and by the end of the year the two others had been executed, a third lieutenant had been made the scapegoat for the army's part in the affair by being beaten and banished, and some thirty other participants had been sentenced to hard labor and flogging.

Imbrie's body left Teheran on August 17 with an honor guard of eight Persian officers, one a general, and four non-commissioned officers, all in uniform with black mourning bands. Since Persia had no railway, the journey was performed by motor convoy. Mrs. Imbrie had suffered a miscarriage and traveled in the company of her physician, Dr. Packard, and Major Sherman Miles, the military attaché at Constantinople, who was designated by the War Department as an official escort. The cortege crossed Iraq by rail and on the 22nd the coffin was placed on a steamer at Basra that carried it to the port of Bushire. There, on the 25th, it was transferred to the light cruiser U.S.S. Trenton. After an elaborate exchange of salutes, the warship sailed for the United States. "All honors demanded of the Persian government," said Major Miles in his report, "were rendered in full, to the best of their ability."

Conspiracy Theories

When I arrived in Teheran to assume charge of the consulate general, people were still talking about the Imbrie affair—not so much the Persians, of course, as the foreign diplomats and businessmen. What, really, was behind the crime? Echoing traditional Anglo-Russian rivalry and intrigue in Persia, the Soviet legation had openly tried to implicate Great Britain in the murder. Others suspected a Soviet plot if for no other reason than because Russian officials in Teheran claimed to be well informed of Imbrie's sympathy for the anti-Bolsheviks in Russia and Turkey. My Armenian clerk, reflecting the venomous anti-British feeling of many Persians, assured me that the killing was unquestionably the result of a conspiracy by the hated Anglo-Persian Oil Company. Then there was the "wrong man" theory: that feuding between two American companies, Standard Oil and Sinclair, both jockeying for concessions in Persia, was responsible; that the mob's fury was directed by mistake against Imbrie, who had been taken for Ralph Soper, the local Sinclair representative. Later, when I returned to the department as the Persian desk officer, I was surprised to hear from Mrs. Imbrie that she herself favored this theory, perhaps because she had been barred from the operating room on the ground that the wounded man was not her husband. There was even the absurd suggestion of a Jewish plot; America's politically appointed ambassador, Rabbi Kornfeld, who resigned after the indemnity was paid, seemed something of an anomaly in a Muslim country. Finally, there was the far-fetched theory that Reza Khan himself had engineered the affair in order to consolidate his position as a strong man and put the mullahs in their place. In an isolated and parochial community, the death of a diplomat—whether by violence or other causes—was an endless excuse for gossip and speculation.

I, too, couldn't help wondering whether there was something more behind the murder than met the eye. But in the absence of proof to the contrary, I could only subscribe to the general belief that Imbrie was the hapless victim of a

highly inflammable religious fanaticism aroused to a dangerous pitch by constant preaching from the clergy. Added to this was the reverence of the masses for the fountain, the Sakkeh Khaneh: a certain gardener, who when asked to pay a few cents for water given him in the name of Abbas, a Shi'ite martyr, had replied that he would give any amount for the late Bahai leader by that name but not a cent for the Shi'ite, had been stricken blind on the spot. The foreign colony, as well as the Persian intelligentsia, regarded the legend as a fantasy, but within the rank and file it was another matter.

It all came down to the strength of religious fervor. As Wallace Murray, second secretary of the legation at the time of the murder, prophesied in a secret and strictly confidential despatch dated August 10, 1924, "Viewing the tragedy in its larger issue, one is led to the inevitable conclusion that . . . unless the malign power of the clergy can be broken forever in this land, there is every reason to believe that the killing of Imbrie is but a foretaste of more terrible events to come."

— Murder in Tehran (Used by permission of the curator)