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Soviet Influence On the Upswing In Post-Shah Iran

The Russian presence in Iran has come a long way since the day a Tehran mob stormed the Soviet Embassy and slaughtered 38 diplomats and three Armenians who had taken refuge there.

That happened in 1929, and relations between the two neighbors have fluctuated ever since. Now, American intelligence analysts believe, the Russians are enjoying more influence in Iran than at any time since World War II.

In fact, a secret CIA cable from Tehran in November, 1978, warned that the Soviets were working behind the scenes for the shah's overthrow, which occurred a few weeks later.

The cable mentioned a Czech offer of arms to the shah's opposition, and noted that the communist Tudeh Party was quite willing to "cooperate with Iranian religious leaders in overthrowing the shah, if the opposition called for the shah's resignation and the legalization of all political parties, and advocated waging an armed struggle if the shah did not resign."

Two months later, the shah was gone and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was the new Iranian strongman. The Soviets were not pleased with the holy man at first; he denounced the Soviets as imperialists second only to the United States.

But the Soviets, recognizing the reality of Khomeini's power, have subsequently made their accommodation with the mullah, on the surface at least. At the same time, in the Soviet tradition of playing both ends against the middle, hard-core communist elements went underground and became part of the leftist guerrillas responsible for assassinating dozens of Khomeini's henchmen.

A secret CIA report shown to my associate Dale Van Atta notes that the Soviets have been skillfully exploiting Iran's isolation from the West. Members of the Tudeh Party, which is estimated to number 10,000, have attained influential middle-level positions in the Khomeini government, and have begun infiltrating at the higher levels as well.

The communists may hold as many as one-third of the top jobs in communications, the banking and oil industries and some key ministries, according to intelligence reports.

Tudeh's stalwarts have been augmented by anywhere from 2,000 to 5,000 Soviet advisers, including 36

Persian-speaking KGB officials who were invited by Khomeini to beef up his security forces last October. After uncovering a bomb planted in their digs at the Tehran Hilton, the KGB experts moved their school for spies to Saltanatabad, a Tehran suburb that was once the headquarters of SAVAK, the shah's secret police.

Western intelligence analysts suspect the Soviets are working determinedly to gain control of the Iranian intelligence and security forces against the day when the ayatollah dies. That would put them in the cat-bird seat for the ensuing power struggle.