In 1979, revolutionaries in Iran deposed the U.S.-backed Shah Mohammed Reza and erected a coalition government dominated by Islamic fundamentalists. Soon thereafter, American hostages were captured by radical Iranian students and held, with the support of the fundamentalist government, for over a year. In the wake of these events, American public opinion of the Iranian revolutionaries was characterized by hatred and demonization. Nikki R. Keddie's 1981 book *Roots of Revolution: An Interpretive History of Modern Iran* came out in the midst of this climate, yet served as a strong counterpoint to it. While not embracing the revolutionaries, Keddie, a veteran scholar of the Middle East, analyzes in detail the numerous factors in Iranian history which, in her view, cumulatively drove them to revolt and gave them ample reason to resent the secular West.

Keddie portrays the past few centuries of Iranian history as an ongoing cycle of crisis and turmoil. She proposes two major sources for Iran's troubles: the disruptions caused by the growing political, technological and cultural influence of the West, and the unwise, insensitive or corrupt policies of a succession of poor rulers. She demonstrates, though, that these external and internal factors are closely intertwined. After laying the groundwork with an overview of Iranian history, Keddie focusses on the Qajar dynasty, an unpopular series of rulers who made little effort to improve the lot of their people, but who retained power for nearly a hundred and thirty years (1796-1925) thanks in part to support from Western powers, mainly Britain and Russia. Although these powers initially sought to exploit Iran as a strategic territory in their ongoing conflicts, the Qajar rulers established strong ties with them both, for the first time bringing a steady Western presence to Iran. According to Keddie, British and Russian backing "helped forestall revolts and rebellions against a dynasty that was widely considered incompetent

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and rapacious.”

The Qajars, despite Western support, showed little interest in modernizing reforms, and permitted the Iranian economy to be weakened by unequal interactions with the West, such as a negative trade balance with Western countries and industrial concessions which gave foreigners unprecedented control over Iranian resources. By the end of the nineteenth century, Britain and Russia virtually controlled large portions of Iran. The Iranian masses already had reason to see the West as a threat.

The turmoil caused by the First World War, according to Keddie, “awakened many Iranians to the need for strong and independent government.” The resultant upheavals led to the rise of Reza Shah to power in the early 1920's. Although direct Western power in Iran diminished after Reza's coup, Keddie suggests that the British encouraged the coup, and that Reza's sympathy toward Britain enabled the West to retain considerable indirect influence.

She acknowledges that Reza Shah's aggressive modernization campaign has been widely praised by many Western writers, but for her own part takes a more critical view of its consequences. She sees his economic reforms as superficial and unsuccessful at bringing real economic improvement to Iran or raising the masses' standard of living. She argues further that Reza Shah's modernization only effectively touched the elite, broadening the divide between classes to the point that the Westernized upper classes “scarcely understood the traditional or religious culture of most of their compatriots.”

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2 Ibid., 46-47.
3 Ibid., 55-62.
4 Ibid., 80.
5 Ibid., 87.
6 Ibid., 94.
7 Ibid., 111.
Keddie is equally critical of Reza Shah’s son and successor, Mohammed Reza, and of the United States’ strong support for him. She speaks more favorably of nationalist premier Mohammed Mosaddeq, citing his efforts at social reform, his popularity, and his “lifelong courage and honesty.” In contrast, she says, Americans portrayed Mosaddeq “as a dangerous fanatic, likely to deliver Iran to the Soviets.”

In Keddie’s view, American policy toward Iran was shaped by the desire to keep Iran anti-Communist and by the appetite for Iranian oil, and served these interests to the detriment of the Iranian people. She asserts not only that the CIA were involved in the overthrow of Mosaddeq, but also that “many Iranians knew [of CIA involvement] from the first.”

Her use of “knew” rather than “suspected” is more polemical than demonstrably factual. She makes similar assumptions about the motives behind the American actions against Mosaddeq, asserting that they were outraged by a “nationalist government taking over, in defiance of the West, economic and strategic resources important to the West.”

Despite these speculative forays, Keddie argues effectively that Iranian nationalists felt betrayed by America, a country which had been seen as a potential ally but which had sided with the shah against nationalist interests. Keddie severely castigates Mohammed Reza's modernization campaign, which she describes as a misguided program of adopting Western technologies and agricultural methods which were often inappropriate to Iranian environmental and economic conditions, coupled with “[t]he shah’s virtual mania” for overdeveloping his military. This led to heavy inflation and shortages, and ultimately to an economic crisis which Keddie interprets in Marxist terms as “a classic prerevolutionary situation.”

In addition, the shah's campaign of secularization added to the alienation of the non-Westernized majority. Keddie asserts that this

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10 *Ibid.*., 143.

11 *Ibid.*., 141.

12 *Ibid.*., 177.
helped guide the ultimate revolution along Islamic lines: “When no traditional or Islamic government had existed for a long time... it was easy to imagine that a return to an idealized Islam, so far past that no one remembered it, could solve Iran's problems.” Keddie does not overlook that this long-forgotten Islamic ideal was really a modern reinterpretation suiting the political and ideological goals of the reformists.\(^{13}\) She also alludes briefly to the Manichaean worldview, inherited by the Iranians from their pre-Islamic ancestors, of a world polarized into divine good and satanic evil -- a worldview which helped revolutionary leaders such as Ayatollah Khomaini cast the shah and America as satanic forces and stir up radical action against them.\(^{14}\)

Keddie is certainly not an apologist for the Khomaini regime. She argues that its self-righteous anti-Westernism has been a crutch to gain popular support, an excuse to silence the regime's internal critics, and a distraction from any efforts at genuine reform. “Anti-imperialist and antiforeign slogans,” she writes, “have been used to bolster rule by inexperienced clerics, skilled mainly in holding power.” She also points out that the taking of American hostages violated Islamic law, which, “as Khomaini must know, supports the inviolability of diplomats visiting a Muslim country from abroad.”\(^{15}\)

\(^{13}\)Ibid., 189.

\(^{14}\)Ibid., 2-3, 255-56.

\(^{15}\)Ibid., 266-67.
Roots of Revolution presents itself as a detailed study of Iranian history, methodical to the point of plodding. The groundwork is laid in such systematic detail that it is initially difficult to sense any thesis, and the book seems more like a simple survey of Iranian history. On further analysis, though, a clear rhetorical slant becomes evident. The text focusses predominantly on the consequences of Western influence in Iran, almost invariably portraying those consequences as negative. Keddie finds Western causes at the roots of most of Iran’s crises for the past several centuries, from the rise of dictators and the fall of reformers to inflation, poverty and famine. She is mostly critical of British and American policies toward Iran, making exceptions only for the Kennedy and Carter administrations’ promotion of social reform. However, her praise is faint, particularly toward Carter, whose good intentions are shown to have negative results. She even digresses to bemoan the diminished quality of Persian carpets resulting from Western tastes and techniques -- going a bit overboard in her criticisms of the West and raising doubts about her objectivity.

Keddie is also clearly opinionated on the economic front, not merely criticizing the inadequate economic reforms of modern Iranian governments but suggesting what should have been done instead. She goes into considerable depth in her economic analysis, often with bewildering detail, but her views do not always appear consistent. At one point she states disapprovingly that “[f]ew landlords and merchants were moved to invest in modern enterprise when traditional exploitation of land and peasants continued to be profitable,” but later writes that “[b]oth agribusinesses and farm corporations have proven to be far less productive than middle peasants..., largely because they have involved huge expenses ... for irrigation and heavy

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16 An example of a famine attributed to Western causes can be found on page 81.

17 For Kennedy, *ibid.*, 151, 155. For Carter, *ibid.*, 178, 231.


machinery in a land of low-cost labor suited to cheaper home-manufactured implements." It is unclear whether she sees more traditional labor as a benefit or a detriment, or if she sees it as being both under different circumstances, in which case she fails to explain the difference.

\[21\text{Ibid.}, 166.\]
If anything, she focusses too much on the economic and political issues of modern Iranian history, and far too little on religious issues. In a book examining the roots of a fundamentalist Islamic revolution, one expects more material on Islam. But Keddie instead favors a Marxist approach which explains historical processes as arising from economic and material factors, and which particularly sees revolution as a natural outgrowth of working-class poverty and unrest. From this viewpoint, non-material factors such as religion are presumed to be derivative or incidental. Keddi discusses religion only intermittently, mainly in the first and eighth chapters, and treats it more as a political force than in terms of its spiritual or emotional meanings to its believers. She justifies this to some extent by asserting that the Islamic forces which came to dominate the revolution were not so prominent in Iranian culture and politics until the 1960s and afterward, and then emerged largely as a reaction to the Westernized, secular culture tyrannically imposed by the Shah. However, she seems to contradict herself on the very next page, referring to “the masses’ Shi’i outlook.” She is somewhat aware that Islam was a dominant force in the lives of most Iranians, but does not explore this spiritual force enough to enable the reader to understand the Islamic revolutionaries or the people who supported them. To be fair, Keddie acknowledges that Islamic thought “has perhaps not received the attention it deserves.” But in this overwhelmingly economic and political tome, Keddie seems ill at ease (or simply unconcerned) with questions of religion, even farming out a subchapter on contemporary Shi’i thought to another author, Yann Richard. Keddie fails to establish a sense of authority with regard to Islam, thus weakening her authority with regard to the Islamic revolution she purports to explain.

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22 Ibid., 202-03.
23 Ibid., 199.
The weaknesses of this monograph by an eminent, veteran scholar are ironically reminiscent of the debut effort of associate professor Jill Lepore, *The Name of War*, a study of a massive English-Algonquian conflict in 1670's New England and its cultural aftermath. Both works undertake sweeping analyses of great conflicts, and both inundate the reader with excessive amounts of information. With Lepore, the reader feels that the novice author is struggling to establish her authority by demonstrating the thoroughness of her research. Keddie gives the opposite impression: that her unquestionable authority justifies her overly detailed presentation. Yet Keddie's purpose is ultimately similar to Lepore's, though subtler. By casting her argument as an encyclopedic essay, she seeks to conceal its polemical, partisan nature. Whereas Lepore uses information overload to persuade the reader of her own legitimacy as a scholar, Keddie uses it to persuade the reader of her interpretation's legitimacy. Both authors, however, ultimately fall short in their attempts. They would have done better to follow the example of Christopher R. Browning, who studies the perpetrators of the Nazi Holocaust in *Ordinary Men*. Rather than seeking to explain a whole war, a whole revolution or a whole national history and psyche, Browning homes in on a specific, well-documented set of persons and events (a single battalion and its wartime activities), sifts the data carefully, analyzes them with scientific precision and seeks strong external support for his positions. Additionally, though Browning does formulate a working theory, he does not assert it as definitive fact. Lepore, conversely, presents herself as definitive although she has little in the way of a conclusion at all. Keddie makes a firm case and presents it with conviction. Yet Browning, the least ambitious and assertive of the three, is ultimately the most persuasive.

In the context of the period in which *Roots of Revolution* was published, its strong anti-Western slant is explainable. In 1981, American sentiment and rhetoric toward Iran were

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overwhelmingly negative; prior to that, American views of Mohammed Reza Shah had been mostly positive. By challenging those assumptions and biases, Nikki Keddie surely made a valuable contribution to American discourse on Iran. Indeed, publishing this book was probably a bold and controversial thing to do at the time. But this contentious stance is ultimately the book’s prime weakness. *Roots of Revolution* is only one side of a decades-old argument. In the long term, this leaves the book unbalanced and incomplete, and of limited utility in understanding modern Iran.