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Lecture about the Situation in Persia by Dr. Bahman Nirumand, followed by a Discussion, on the Eve of the Shah's Visit to West Berlin (Excerpts)

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Summary:

In West Germany as in other capitalist democratic countries in what now is called the Global North, an increasing number of students were more and more radicalized in the 1960s. They were not exceptional: in some countries—think for instance of Italy—some workers underwent a similar evolution. Moreover, some students and workers met and communicated in various forms and place like cafés, dorms, or factories, where some students had to work. And both students' and workers' radicalization led them in various ways away from established social democrat, socialist, and communist parties.

But there were differences, too. In West Germany, so-called "new leftist" German students like Rudi Dutschke (1940-1979) were from the early 1960s most distinctly influenced by texts by decolonizing actors-intellectuals like Ernesto "Che" Guevara (1928-1967) and Frantz Fanon (1925-1961). Their worldview was shaped by fellow students from recently decolonized and postcolonial countries, as Quinn Slobodian's *Foreign Front: Third World Politics in Sixties West Germany* (2012) shows. Among these students were Iranians, for many Iranians wishing to study abroad opted for West Germany following World War II. This pattern built on sturdy modern political, economic and cultural Iranian-German relations from the nineteenth century to the early Second World War. Hence, in the 1960s, West Germany became a key arena for Iranian exile politics. In the university town of Heidelberg, Iranian students with France- and Britain-based colleagues in 1960 founded a body that would be known as the Confederation of Iranian Students, National Union (CISNU) from 1962, when US-based Iranian student bodies joined and Tehran students were associated. CISNU was in the 1960s-70s a leading force outside Iran opposing Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (1919-1980; r. 1941-1979)—a story told by Afshin Matin-Asgari's *The Iranian Student Opposition to the Shah* (2002). In parallel, in the 1960s the shah was able to become the autocratic ruler he had wanted to be from the 1940s.

In West Germany, one analysis of the shah's state was the ironically titled *Persien, Modell eines Entwicklungslandes* [Persia: Model Development Country], published in spring 1967 by Bahman Nirumand. Born in 1936, Nirumand was a high school and then university student in Germany from 1950 to 1960, then moved back to Iran to work as an academic and journalist, and in 1965 escaped back to Germany fearing arrest for co-leading the underground Marxist-Leninist group *Goruh-e Kaderha*. In his book *Persien*, he argued that changes like the land reform of 1963 are a reformist façade hiding an anti-democratic repressive capitalist regime, which is backed by equally repressive capitalist Western states led by imperialist Washington. In fact, to him, Iran illustrated how Third-World and First-World elites together repress their people—a truly global pattern.

To be sure, Vietnam constituted the key anti-imperialist cause for organizations like the *Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund* (SDS), which in 1961 had been evicted by the mainstream *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (SPD) and by 1966 was part of West Germany's *ausser-* (i.e. extra-) *parlamentarische Opposition*. Even so, when the German government announced a visit by the shah for early June 1967, the SDS soon decided to support Iranian student protests. These were legally “problematic” because West Germany's 1965 Aliens Act drastically limited foreigners' right to political activism. What began as a teach-in about Iran in West Berlin on June 1 and as a protest against the shah on June 2 became a turning point in postwar German history. On June 2, the police did not only condone pro-shah loyalists' violence against the demonstrators. It also shot dead a demonstrator, Benno Ohnesorg, intensifying students' fears about a fascist rebirth and causing the student movement to grow swiftly and become more radical.

The text printed here is a translated excerpt from the German-language audio file of the teach-in on Iran of June 1 at the *Freie Universität* (FU) Berlin. Opened by Gabriele Kuby (born 1944), a member of the FU's General Students Committee, the teach-in featured Nirumand, who spoke for about an hour and a half on the world's current economic-political condition for which Iran was a case in point, and Hans-Heinz Heldmann (1929-1995), a German lawyer representing Iranian and other foreign students politically active in Germany. Followed by a few notes on other political matters, these two lectures were then discussed by the students; Dutschke, since 1965 a leading SDS member, drew a parallel between Vietnam and Iran. Attended by about 2,000 students, the teach-in had a strongly mobilizing effect on the protests the next day, June 2.

Original Language:

German

Contents:

Translation - English

[Gabriele Kuby, welcome notes, minutes 01:10-02:22 of the audio tape]: Ladies and gentlemen, I hope all of you understand clearly that you are committing an unfriendly act against the Light of the Aryans, [1] his Imperial Highness Muhammad Reza Pahlevi. (Applause.) We are talking about a very sensitive emperor, who wants to be loved by his and by all people and who spares no means to make sure that he is surrounded only by people who love him. The Federal Republic [of Germany] apparently is deeply understanding of this need and takes it into account in all possible ways, as the background to this event illustrates. You know, the imperial Iranian embassy is opposed to our planned panel discussion. It intervened at the Foreign Office, the Foreign Office intervened at the Senate of Berlin, the Senate of Berlin sent a senate councillor to the [Freie Universität's] General Students Committee, who asked whether we could not postpone our event a bit (shouts of protest) or if we could at least uninvite Mister Nirumand. The shah may not be in a position to come to Berlin (applause, shouts of bravo)—[though] he now thinks he is able to come although Mr. Nirumand talks. [...]

[Bahman Nirumand, lecture, minutes 10:56-13:57 and 17:26-21:05 of the audio tape]: Ladies and gentlemen, in 1943 in Tehran, Britain's Churchill gave Russia's Stalin a glimpse into his political philosophy. [2] He said that it is the satisfied nations, those that do not wish more for themselves than they already possess, which need to be put in charge of ruling the world. Would world government be in the hands of hungry nations, we would be in constant danger. But nobody among us has a reason to seek whatever further possessions; our power lifts us above the rest of the world. We resemble rich people who live in peace in their houses. Well—since those days, this world government has assumed the affairs of the peaceful and rich people with purpose and determination. Peacefully so, when the conditions that it dictates are recognized as *a priori* reasonable. With considerable insistence there, where people refused to assent to Churchill's sentence as the fundamental axiom of world politics in the middle of the twentieth century. Today, when the hungry nations begin to rid themselves more and more of a rationality that only guarantees their naked lives and colonized status, the rich people's peacefulness shows its true face in napalm flames and bomb detonations. The developments in Vietnam have once and for all finished the aura of humanity and crusader ideology that has until now been wrapped around the neocolonialist politics of our time. It is as clear as daylight that decolonization has nothing to do with the idea of people's self-determination, freedom, or indeed a class-less international society. To the contrary: it is the continuation of imperialism with refined means. More refined not only in relation to the modified economic functioning of the former colonial countries, but also regarding the self-understanding of the ideology of the free world and the changed consciousness of the population in the industrial countries.

[...]

[T]he replacement of a martial imperialist terminology is based not only on adaptation and appeasement tactics. Rather, it points to structural changes within capitalism itself and, consequently, the functioning of former colonial countries. In the era of conquests and of earlier colonialism, colonialist politics sought to forcefully take possession of colonial countries' goods and services, mindlessly overexploiting the human beings, the soil, the vegetation, and the minerals of those areas. But in the age of classical imperialism, increasing productivity and a surplus of capital in need of investment moved to the foreground the need to import raw materials from the preindustrial countries and to export to them goods for which there was not enough purchase power at home. Moreover, there was a need to export capital which created higher returns in the pre-capitalist areas than at home, which prevented an erosion of the returns of the capital that was not exported, and which helped export goods, too. (A man shouts: *Thema!*, i.e. "Get to the point!", i.e. Iran). These investments—ahem, I opine that this has something to do with the theme (applause); I do not consider the situation in Persia to be Persia's domestic affair (applause)—these investments have deeply changed the economic and social structures of the dependent countries, establishing agricultural monocultures, expanding a one-sided extractive industries like mining and oil, and, last but not least, creating a corrupt comprador stratum, whose existence demoralizes society as a whole. This deformation of the economic structure not only made the economy of the respective country more crisis-prone. Rather, via indebtedness and bondage to

world market prices for raw materials, it also led to new extreme relationships of dependence that continue today. The changed global political situation after the two world wars, i.e. the establishment of socialist governments especially in the Soviet Union and China, and the modified status of ex-colonies ushered in the third phase of colonialist politics, which since then is motivated by supporting the economic growth of underdeveloped countries.

[...]

[1] *Aryamehr*, The Light of the Aryans, was an official title of the Shah from 1965; it was used to stress the pre-Islamic foundation of Iranian monarchy and built on the view, growing from the later nineteenth century, that Iranians are racially Aryans. It obviously had a particular connotation in post-Nazi Germany.

[2] Churchill, Stalin, and Roosevelt had a crucial meeting in Tehran in 1943.