

# FRIENDSHIP OF NATIONS



## Polish Shi'ite Showbiz

Slavs and Tatars



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**Friendship of Nations:  
Polish Shi'ite Showbiz  
Slavs and Tatars**

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19 Holywell Row,  
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**Essays commissioned by**  
Slavs and Tatars

**Edited by**

Mara Goldwyn

**Editorial assistance by**

Gavin Everall, Jane Rolo  
and Camilla Wills

**Proofreading by**  
Gerrie van Noord

**Designed by**

Boy Vereecken/  
Slavs and Tatars,  
with the assistance of  
Monika Gruzite

**Production (Poland):**

Joanna Lopat and  
Krzysztof Pyda

**Production (Iran):**

Roksana Fazeli

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# INTRODUCTION

## SLAVS AND TATARS

Our interest in the improbable affinities of Poland and Iran began rather innocently, if cryptically, some four years ago. In a missive from Berlin, the periodical *O32c* asked us to think about two key dates – 1979 and 1989 – in anticipation of the planned celebrations marking the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. So, in true bibliophile form, we took the two calendar years as bookends to the two major geopolitical narratives of the



twentieth and twenty-first centuries: namely, Communism and political Islam.

While the former Warsaw Pact countries – from the GDR to the Czech Republic, Hungary to Poland – had belatedly ripped a page from Reagan's playbook, each trying to take credit for the downfall of Communism in Europe's own backyard, the fireworks marking the thirtieth anniversary of the Iranian revolution were more muddled. Like a homeopathic supplement, the Islamic Republic of Iran's impending crisis of direction was released with a considerable delay. The revolution's startling speed – not to mention unprecedented religious and ideological scope in the modern era – was swiftly hardened by a near decade-long war of attrition with Iraq, backed and spurred on by Western powers and Gulf nations eager to see the power of the first Islamic theocracy in a millennium checked. After a period of relative thaw, the current regime's attempt to reinvigorate the original promises of the revolution through demagoguery only further



proves Marx's old adage that history repeats itself first as tragedy then as farce.

As we researched these two modern moments, the contested 2009 presidential elections in Iran exposed the limits of political Islam, just as the rest of the Muslim world began to test-drive its own version. After months of popular protest that led to a government crackdown, many in the reform movement, in particular the Green Movement, began to look to Eastern Europe, and especially to Poland's *Solidarność* during the 1980s, as a successful precedent for non-violent civil disobedience. Polish authors and thinkers hitherto unavailable in Persian, from Czesław Miłosz to Zygmunt Bauman, Wisława Szymborska to Leszek Kołakowski, were being translated with an urgency unique to those determined in Iran to find a historical precedent in the slippery stakes of self-determination.

'It's too soon to say', to paraphrase Zhou Enlai's response when asked by Nixon about



the French Revolution. If the same could be said about the 1979 Iranian Revolution, our decision to focus primarily on the case study of Poland in 1989 seemed less polemical. Poland's non-confrontational, slow-burn strike movement Solidarność maintained momentum throughout the 1980s without the blood-letting witnessed in Budapest, 1956 or in Prague, 1968. Whether it's the political stagnation that slinks forwards today in Iran, or the baby steps in civil society across certain countries of the Arab Spring, the Polish mix of methodical, behind-the-scenes non-violent disobedience, the instrumentalisation of faith as a progressive force, and a deft use of compromise, remains as relevant today as at any point in the past half-century.

As bona fide contrarians, our bookends face outwards, though. They push not against an existing series of volumes or particular body of knowledge but rather point towards an empty shelf, towards a collection of tomes still to be



written. While 1989 spelt the end of the Cold War and Communism's ostensible challenge to Western liberal democracy, 1979 marked the beginning of the next – conceivable successor – historical narrative in the shape of political Islam. The approximation of these two narratives, though perhaps at first glance counter-intuitive, is not only a fixation of Slavs and Tatars, but also of Uighurs, Talysh and Kurds among others. In fact, the list of scholars trying to bridge these two ideologies is a storied one. Ali Shariati's deft mix of Marxism and Shi'a Islam through the figure of Abu Dharr, the first Islamic socialist and companion of the Prophet, provided intellectual force in the early days of the Iranian Revolution. Meanwhile the late Norman O. Brown, Professor at the University of California, Santa Cruz and scholar of Blake and Joyce, considered Islam and Marxism, 'two kinds of social criticism alive in the world today'. In Europe, the French Professor of Political Science Olivier Roy draws a convincing correspondence between the



increasing attraction today of political Islam on the one hand, and the collapse of traditional left-wing ideologies and labour movements in the last two decades on the other.<sup>1</sup>

In a historiographic version of Whac-a-Mole, our comparative look at the Iranian Revolution and Solidarność led us to seek out additional episodes of common heritage and cultural affinities between the two peoples. The contributors' essays in this book aim to fill in some of the gaps in the common histories of Poland and Iran. We hope readers will forgive what may seem like a hopscotch across history; the very nature of our task – exploring a shared heritage between two countries with distinctly different cultures, religions, economies and geopolitical challenges – belies the exhaustive,

1. 'And so I end with a vision of two kinds of social criticism alive in the world today: Marxism and Islam. Two still-revolutionary forces. Two tired old revolutionary horses. Neither of them doing very well but

it would be a mistake to take any comfort from their failure. The human race is at stake. And they both, Marxism and Islam, agree on one proposition: There will be one world or there will be none.' Norman O. Brown,

*The Challenge of Islam: The Prophetic Tradition*. Santa Cruz: New Pacific Press, 2009.



linear approach better left to scholars of history. The entangled story of Poland and Iran dates back to the very beginning of the seventeenth century, when a Polish envoy of Armenian origin, Sefer Muratowicz, was sent to Persia under the premise of purchasing carpets for the Polish court of King Sigismund. If both countries had a shared rival in the Ottoman Empire, this enmity wasn't entirely reciprocated in the late-eighteenth century when Persia and the Ottomans were the only two countries not to recognise the partition of Poland.<sup>2</sup> Regardless of the speculation that Muratowicz's true brief was to gather intelligence in advance of a Papal envoy visit, Persia had already influenced Poland in ways it could never have imagined, via the peculiar lifestyle and ideology known as Sarmatism.

2. Despite Safavid Persia's various entreaties, Poland showed little appetite for military attacks on the Ottomans. See Embassy of the Republic of Poland in Iran, *Poland and Persia: Pages from the History of Polish*

*Persian Relations*. Tehran: Ketab Sara Company, 2009.



During a relatively enlightened Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Polish nobility ascribed to a myth of origins where their ancestors had been a long-lost Iranic tribe from the Black Sea. First popularised by Polish renaissance geographer Maciej Miechowita (1457–1523) in his *Tractatus de duabus Sarmatiis* (*Treatise on the Two Sarmatias*), Sarmatism provided the perfect premise for the Polish *szlachta* to out-macho what they considered their more effeminate-dressed Western European colleagues by riding horses, carrying swords, and getting haircuts worthy of a Persian, Tatar, Chinese, Apache, or any other Other. The phenomenon merits further investigation by scholars, researchers, and cultural figures alike, as does much of Slavic Orientalism, especially Russian and Soviet, whose cultural and geographic proximity to the subject of study complicates the often reductivist discourse surrounding Western Orientalism. In this volume, Agata Araszkiewicz's essay sheds some much-needed light on Sarmatism



and namely its spectre in recent attempts, post-Cold War, to draft a coherent Polish identity.

Nearly a decade ago, Iranian-Canadian philosopher Ramin Jahanbegloo was invited to guest-edit an issue of *Pol-e Firuzeh* (*The Turquoise Bridge*), a quarterly periodical that has suffered the fate of so much of Iran's reformist press, and has since closed down. In a farsighted gesture, Jahanbegloo devoted his issue to Poland, whose transformation from a country at the mercy of rival geopolitical narratives to a model of self-determination clearly resonates with the Iranian philosopher, but presents him and us with as many questions as it does answers. Jahanbegloo's foresight in dedicating the issue to Poland has only grown more acute in recent years as a critical model to understand such complex notions of compromise, historical justice, and civil society.<sup>3</sup>

3. This past, however, has also been mined and leveraged as an official policy of soft-diplomacy by the current Polish

government in initiatives either within its own vicinity, such as Belarus and Ukraine (see Eastern Partnership Cultural

Programme) or what it considers spirits in kind, such as Georgia.



Jahanbegloo's interview with Adam Michnik, one of the leading figures of the *Solidarność* movement and current editor-in-chief of *Gazeta Wyborcza* – available here for the first time in English – puts the advantage of twenty years worth of hindsight to hone in on the wrinkles and setbacks of *Solidarność*'s initial goals.

If Sarmatism and the analysis of 1979 Iran and 1980s Poland allow us to look at the two countries' attempt at self-determination, the episode of the Polish Exodus to Iran during World War II offers a rare but defining instance of large-scale, societal collaboration between the two nations. In 1942 and perhaps in the only European migration in Iran's history, nearly 116,000 Polish refugees made their way into Iran from labour camps in the Soviet Union. More than 13,000 of these were children under the age of fourteen, which earned the royal city of Esfahan the nickname 'City of Polish Children'. One could say that the long-standing affection between the

two countries' peoples today, five decades on, stems from this defining moment. Mara Goldwyn visits this moment in the two countries' collective history through the story of an endearing Hamedani bear adopted by Polish soldiers in General Anders' Army named Wojtek.

The elephant, or rather another bear, in the room in this story is Russia, either in its Imperial form or its Soviet iteration. While its repressive political influence in Poland is well-known – from partitioning the country throughout the eighteenth century to Soviet control throughout a large part of the twentieth – Russia's role in Iran is a far murkier affair. Not enough ink has been spilt on the two countries' relations. Despite sharing borders for much of the twentieth century and trading territories over the course of the last three centuries, both Iran and Russia continue to face westwards, whether in envy, insecurity, or more likely a combination of both. If mentioned at all, Iran's



relationship with Russia only comes up as a counterweight in the Cold War competition with the United States for the country's alignment and affection. What more glaring incarnation of this scholarly blindspot than the very establishment of Iran's current capital, Tehran, in the north, to a large degree a response to encroaching Russian Imperial expansion to the Caucasus and Central Asia in the nineteenth century, during a weakened Qajar-era Persia.

For the purposes of this book though, it is the 1917 Russian Revolution that squares the triangle of three dates – 1979, 1989, and 2009 – at the origins of *Friendship of Nations: Polish Shi'ite Showbiz*. 1917 was the opening chapter to 1989's closing chapter, as well as a precedent of sorts for 1979, which borrowed heavily from the anti-imperial, liberationist ideology that had fuelled much of the left throughout the twentieth century, and a prophetic, uncanny tease for 2009 and the utter failure of the economic model of unregulated, Anglo-American capitalism.



In charting the improbable rapport between Iran and Poland, *Friendship of Nations: Polish Shi'ite Showbiz* seeks to rescue the old Soviet notion of дружба народов (literally 'friendship between peoples' or 'fraternity of peoples') from its former, cynical self. One of the main ideologies of the USSR, дружба народов advocated the principle of harmony and cooperation between peoples and nations on the path to socialist development. A characteristic example of this policy would take place during an official ceremony when the Azeri Soviet Socialist Republic offered a rug to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic which would respond in kind with a sculpture made of wheat. Invariably the gifts highlighted a nation's craft, but in a top-down reductionism characteristic of so many of the USSR's otherwise seemingly noble policies. Slavs and Tatars discuss a resolutely grass-roots redemption of this policy, investing the logic of gifts with a discursive narrative of shared



experiences, struggles and achievements between these two countries in their respective drive towards self-determination in the essay 'Craft as Citizen Diplomacy'. That certain traditions of craftsmanship are shared among Iranians and Poles is perhaps the expression of other, less material, affinities between Catholicism and Shi'ism. Religion – from its political exploitation to its agency in civil disobedience movements – is a present and deliberate actor in this book. Shiva Balaghi and Michael D. Kennedy's essay on the Polish Orientalist Aleksander Chodźko offers a unique reading of the confluence of Shi'a and Catholic dramatic traditions, in the forms of the *taziye*h and medieval Passion play, respectively.

Against a tidal wave of expanding emphasis on the visual, the wordsmith's trade is proving itself surprisingly resilient. Able to carve out entire regions of dry land from the flood of language, the wordsmith sees in the



combination of letters a soapbox on which to stand. For Slavs and Tatars, language remains a craft unto itself: be it the emphasis on process tantamount to handiwork; its ability to jam time, and thereby conceal as much as reveal, meaning; its talismanic hold on us as wholly other, or its sometimes DIY aesthetic. The performativity of shaping words from the composite languages in our otherwise linguistically spoilt geographical remit of Eurasia has been equally important to our research and our works. Walter Benjamin defined the natural habitat of the storyteller among craftsmen: the latter are seen as an especially responsive audience, lulled by the repetition of handiwork. While the craftsmen might know the past and time, the storytellers, often journeymen, are experts of distance and space. Medieval Sufi guilds, which in a heartbeat would have extended an invitation to Benjamin as one of their own for his rare mix of mysticism and material engagement, also linked wordplay with crafts.



From the tenth century to the present day, a unique branch of Persian-Tajik literature called *shahr-āshūb* glorified the various artisan trades of medieval cities. As odes to the handsome youth manning some of these shops, the verses were known to cause quite a public storm, hence the name *shahr-āshūb* or *shahrangiz* which translates as ‘city disturbing’ or ‘verses troubling a city’, respectively.

Each chapter in this book opens with a selection of *shahr-āshūb* gathered by Mehdi Keyvani in his excellent study *Artisans and Guild Life in the later Safavid Period*. Accompanying the verses are aphorisms, slogans, and ephemera from Eastern Europe in the 1980s, whose playful, linguistic craftsmanship, not to mention a fragrant amorous streak, reveals a complex understanding of political, economic, and civic resistance as equally intellectual and affective. The hand’s trace – so important in much of the discourse surrounding craft – is perhaps best seen in these texts: from anti-

Communist graffiti to silkscreened flyers, Islamic calligraphy to samizdat. The second of our three cycles of work, *Friendship of Nations: Polish Shi'ite Showbiz* continues to play a pivotal position in our practice: midwifing the evolution of our initial interests in excavating hitherto overlooked histories into a multiplatform offering, more redolent of a souk than an exhibition.<sup>4</sup>

To do justice to this intricate story, Slavs and Tatars turned to a similar fanning out of media: from a magazine contribution to a balloon, an archive to textile works, public billboards to lectures, publication to craft-specific sculptures. This volume is only the latest installment in this research.

Perhaps most importantly, *Friendship of Nations* has compelled us to consider shared

4. Slavs and Tatars' first cycle of work, *Kidnapping Mountains*, celebrated the linguistic and narrative complexity in the Caucasus (the eponymous book, *Molla Nasreddin, Hymns of No Resistance*) while

the third cycle, *The Faculty of Substitution*, investigates the notion of mystical protest and the revolutionary role of the sacred and syncretic, across recent publications and solo engagements at

Secession, Vienna (*Not Moscow Not Mecca*), MoMA, NY (*Beyonsense*), and Moravia Gallery, Brno (*Khhhhhhh*).



history as an expression of hospitality – if not generosity itself. Iran and Poland's relationship is not merely one determined by the Cold-War stalwarts of Russia and the United States. It's a pity that allegiances in general are conceived as singular, exclusive affairs.

As the endgame of loyalty only gains in severity the higher up the scale one climbs, the more we must struggle to keep blurred the boundaries of where one nation's, one people's, or one ideology's history begins and another one's ends. Woe to the hapless immigrant, who finds themselves caught between devotion to home and host country, mother tongue and second language, former and future passport. The proliferation of allegiances – to languages, histories, beliefs – keeps us on our toes, constantly negotiating the pitfalls at the heart of monogamous polemics and brittle identity politics. If we are steadfast believers in sticking to the singular in our love lives, then surely our affections for places, peoples, histories,



languages and countries could and should escape the girdle of the singular and unique and spill, joyously, into the plural and polyphonic.

Slavs and Tatars cannot think of a better means to pounce, once and for all, on the relentless recourse to identity politics than to divert it with too many devotions, indulge and overburden it by pledging one's heart and mind to several places, until the desire to define as one *or* the other collapses, ceremoniously, buckling under the weight of several sympathies masquerading instead as so many *ands*.