



A Modern Contagion: Imperialism and Public Health in Iran's Age of Cholera,

by Amir A. Afkhami (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), 370 pp., \$54.95 (cloth), \$54.95 (E book). ISBN 9781421427218; 9781421427225

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BOOK REVIEW

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As has long been recognized in European history, and is increasingly acknowledged in Middle Eastern Studies, the nineteenth century was a period of rapidly accelerating globalization, the ever faster and easier movement of people, ideas and objects. This phenomenon did not, however, possess only such features as the circulation of intellectuals, the dissemination of books and newspapers and the development of new modes of transport. One of the fastest and easiest of movements was that of contagious disease, in particular cholera. Epidemics, along with increasingly severe famines and food shortages, both phenomena resulting, at least in their aggravated form, from globalization, were the scourge of the nineteenth century, across much of Europe as well as throughout the non-European world. In Britain, for example, the cholera riot became a familiar occurrence in a quickly industrializing and urbanizing society as terrified populations attempted to flee the quarantines, the rich escaping, the poor imprisoned in their homes with little medical or any other assistance, while the struggle against cholera pandemics shaped the development of an eventually triumphant system of public health. The European experience of epidemic and pandemic disease and the fight to control it has been well-documented. In the book reviewed here, Amir Afkhami tells us Iran's story which, he argues, has been both neglected and obscured by an over-concentration in Iranian Studies generally on high politics and international relations. The period covered is roughly that of Qajar rule, the late eighteenth century to the founding of the Pahlavi dynasty in 1925, and Afkhami's central objective is an ambitious one: to go beyond a mere description of the repeated cholera epidemics to analyze the role of contagion in the adoption of new medical and health paradigms and indeed of attitudes to government more broadly.

Afkhami's analysis is finely balanced. He begins by pointing out that it was European, and specifically British, expansion which first brought cholera into Iran in 1821 from its endemic home in the Ganges Delta, Iranian medical practitioners helpless against this hitherto unknown disease. The casualties of this first epidemic were apocalyptic, and later outbreaks were as bad or worse. Afkhami then describes the really quite rapid globalization of Iranian medicine, as the Qajar elite engaged with new ideas about the causes and treatment of cholera and Iran joined the 'emerging transnational sanitary regime' in Europe which advocated measures such as the provision of safe drinking water and the improvement of drainage and sewage systems. Afkhami adopts perspectives drawn from social and intellectual as well as political history. Indeed it seems that his social history narratives often shed more light on Iranian politics than political history can. His quotes from the memoirs of Taj al-Saltana, the shah's sister, for example, illustrate vividly not only the impact of a cholera epidemic on the general population but also the hopeless inadequacy of the authorities and the still primitive condition of state institutions. Weaving the story of cholera into the wider history of nineteenth century Iran, he shows how concerns about public health and hygiene contributed to the emergence of a broad modernist discourse in the late nineteenth-early twentieth century, becoming conceptualized as an essential component of the new civilization (*tamaddun-i jadid*) advocated by reformist intellectuals of the period. More specifically, Afkhami also argues that cholera epidemics contributed directly to

the outbreak of the Constitutional Revolution in 1905, new ideas about disease as preventable and treatable making the authorities in general, and the government in particular, demonstrably responsible for public health and demonstrably failing in that responsibility, the Revolution itself following on the severe cholera epidemic of 1904.

Afkhami's book is a valuable addition to the growing body of scholarship on public health and medicine in Iran. He has consulted an impressive array of archival and published sources, although he seems to have missed R. M. Burrell's interesting account, based on British sources, of the outbreaks of cholera in 1904 which followed on the heels of the progress of an eminent cleric as he travelled around the country, impervious to quarantine or other regulations.

Epidemic disease and famine ravaged the population of Iran throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century and both contributed materially to the political and social tensions of the period. But both have been marginalized and even ignored in accounts of Iran's historical development. Afkhami's account goes some way towards rectifying this neglect, linking Iranian politics to the actual daily experience of the population. The book ends with an epilogue which discusses recent epidemics in Iran, of cholera in the 1960s and narcotic addiction up until the present, and government responses. It would have been instructive, had time and publication schedules allowed, for Afkhami to bring his story up to date to include the current global pandemic and the attitudes towards it of the Iranian authorities and the wider population. But perhaps that would be worth a book of its own.

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