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The visit of the Persian Shah on the 2nd of June 1967 in Berlin



Abstract

On the 2nd of June 1967 the Persian Mohammad Shah Pahlavi together with his wife Farah Diba visited West-Berlin. This event became crucial both for Iranian and for German history. It was supposed to strengthen the ties between Germany and Iran as countries of the Western alliance; enhance the international recognition of West-Germany and support the talks about a closer economic cooperation. The events, however, turned into another direction. At all the places the Shah visited he was met with vigorous protest. Members of the Iranian Secrete Police were ordered to greet him and to beat students gathering to protest against him. The German police did not interfere. A similar story repeated itself in the evening when the Shah was attending the Berlin opera. In clashes between the students and the police Benno Ohnesorg, a student of philology, died. His death served as the starting point for the student revolution. They protested, among other things, against the uncritical view of other spectators that were just interested in the glamour surrounding the Shah.

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1 Introduction

1968 was a crucial year in recent European history. It became a symbol of the so called student-revolution. A whole generation - "the 68ies" - is even named after it. It changed the political landscape of Europe, the relationships between men and women, and the way people dress and communicate with each other. In the aftermath many institutions, especially the universities, underwent a dramatic change. Hence it is interesting to look at the events which caused this revolution. It is difficult to isolate them because "1968" is a serial of interwoven events. Nevertheless, some of them stand out as particularly memorable. Among them is the visit of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi and his second wife Farah Diba in June 1967 in West-Berlin which is widely understood as the starting point of the 1968-movement. It was intensively covered by the press and media and became due to the tragic death of Benno Ohnesorg part of German's collective memory. The picture on the frontpage, for instance, showing the shot Ohnesorg on ground hold by a woman that looks at the reporter with a mixture from anger and horror became an iconic picture of Germany's post war history.

Besides, the visit's impact on European culture and politics showed the many images the Shah had in the German public. He was a well known and controversial figure in it. Partly, he was portrayed as an outstanding and innovative emperor, partly as a cruel dictator. During his regency he tried to modernize Iran, i.e. to bring about fundamental changes in Iranian culture, economy and life-style. Many Iranians opposed his plans and were prosecuted and tortured for their protest. This suppression drew the attention of human right activists, students and the European press. Some compared the Pahlavi rule to the Nazi regime. Others regarded these actions as necessary side-effects of modernization and a protection against insurgence. A significant part of the German population, however, was not interested in the interior politics of Iran but rather in the glamour surrounding the Shah and his wife. Their visit to Berlin hence became therefore the focus both of the yellow press on the one hand and of critical students on the other hand.

The aim of the following paper is to describe these different aspects of his visit and to look how it was and how it is remembered in the German public. In order to do that it is necessary to tell first why this visit was important both for Iranian (2) and for German politics (3) and describe thus the background in front of which it took place. Secondly, the major events of this visit shall be looked at. Although there were

competing versions of them in the beginning there is now a general consensus about, at least, the major facts (4). Besides, it is interesting to look at the way the visit was portrayed in the press and to analyse which of its aspects got the greatest attention. It had repercussions for the student revolution 1968 and the German-Iranian relationship (5).

The paper uses as its major sources the contemporary press of 1967 as well as documentaries and autobiographies in books, journals and television. Although they differ in the interpretations of the visit they mostly agree on the facts. This is, probably, due to the extensive coverage of the visit by television, radio and press. It is useful to compare the press at various points of time as later e. the revolution in 1979 might have changed the evaluation of the Shah and its visit in Berlin.

2 The importance of the Shahs visit for Iran

In order to understand the events it is worthwhile to remember first the historical situation of Iran and West-Germany in 1967. Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi came to power in 1941 after Great Britain and the US forced his father to step down. Mohammad Shah pursued a policy of moderate modernization. As his father Reza Schah Pahlavi he wanted a Western life-style for Iran but was, in comparison to him, more ready to make compromises with the traditional and religious Muslim clergy. For instance, he allowed women to wear the shador, after his father had prohibited this in 1937. In the 1950ies Iran underwent a deep political crisis about the nationalization of the oil-industry which was mainly owned by the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (later known as the British Petroleum Company). During this crisis the Shah was forced to go into exile to Italy. He could regain political power with the help of the CIA that organized a coup against prime-minister Mossadegh in 1953.

After the Shah returned to Iran he was faced with bitter opposition by various parties, among them the communist by the Tudeh-party aiming at an alliance with the Soviet Union, by the conservative National Front of former prime minister Mossadegh demanding independence from Britain and by the Mullahs, most noticeable Ruhollah Musavi Chomeini, opposing the westernisation in general. As a result the Shah lived in permanent fear of a assassination or an revolution that would as 1952 in Egypt and 1958 in Iraq abolish the constitutional monarchy. Despite the progress in the modernization of Iran and a growing support of farmers as well as workers profiting from this process he relied more and more on the army and the Savak, the secret police, that was rigourously prosecuting political opponents. As a consequence the Shah acquired inside and outside

Iran the image of a cruel dictator. Nevertheless, the CIA kept supporting him as the US regarded him as a reliable ally at the front to the Soviet Union.

In the beginning of the 1960ies the inner Iranian tensions grew after the so called white revolution which was initiated and planned by the Shah. The old feudal system was abolished, land and forests expropriated from the landlords, and the national industries privatised. Women got the suffrage. Programs were installed to make more Iranians literate. Like the name “revolution” hints many of these actions were implemented by force. For example, the army was used to educate people in the countryside. For these programs the Shah needed more money than he would get by taxes and the income from the oil-industry. Therefore, he took credits from Western banks and governments, including Germany. Furthermore, he tried to modernize the industry and craft by supporting Western companies to invest in Iran.

When the Shah came to Germany in 1967 he had, therefore, three major aims: First of all, he wanted to strengthen his ties within the Western alliance from which he depended both militarily and economically. West-Germany was one of the major allies of the US in Europe and a front-state to the communist block. Building and strengthening the relationship to it could further his own position within the Western alliance. Therefore, it was not an accident that he visited West-Berlin which was surrounded by the Communist GDR and under a permanent threat of a Soviet invasion. Visiting this “island of freedom” as many Western politicians liked to call it was a symbol of support. It made once more clear that he would oppose any attempt by the communist party inside Iran to gain power. The threat by the communists was not totally unrealistic as Iran was a direct neighbour to the Soviet Union which kept supporting the Iranian communist party. The Shah himself had fought the Soviet occupation of North Iran before.

Secondly, the visit aimed at strengthening the economic ties with West-Germany. Iran had received credits from Germany before and further credits were planned. German companies like the former Berlin based Siemens AG had investments in Iran. The Shah hoped to keep their trust and use it for future investments in Iran. Finally, there was a personal aspect of his visit. His first wife, Soraya, was half-German and became a public figure in the German press. He had been with her to West-Germany in 1955 (Spiegel 42). As the daughter of the former Iranian ambassador to Germany she had played a prominent role in the relationship to West-Germany. After the Shah divorced her in 1958 the danger emerged that the close ties between Iran and West-

Germany would decrease. The second wife Farah Diba even said that everything which she does in Germany reminds her that it is the country of Soraya (Köhler 30). The Shahs first visit to Germany after the divorce was therefore also aimed to ban this danger and to establish relationships to Germany independent upon his former wife Soraya.

3 The importance of the Shahs visit for West-Germany

As with Iran it is worthwhile to look at Germany's foreign and internal policy in order to understand the importance of the Shah's visit. After having lost World War II in 1945 West-Germany struggled for international recognition. Although it was integrated into the Western Alliance many states remained sceptical about West-Germany and its politicians. The atrocities of the war and the holocaust dominated the collective memory of many nations. The greatest part of Germany's political, cultural and economic elites was involved in the war. For instance, the chancellor Kiesinger that ruled in 1967 for the Christian Democrats used to be a member of the NSDAP – the fascist party during the Hitler regime. Therefore, other nations hesitated to develop strong political and cultural ties with West-Germany and reduced it to the minimal amount necessary to integrate it into the Western military alliance. Any foreign statesman that could break this half-hearted relationship was warmly welcome. This was especially true of the Persian Shah as an emperor with a surrounding glamour.

An even graver consequence of World War II for Germany was its separation into East and West. The East was allied with the Soviet Union and the West with the US, France and Britain. Since 1961 Berlin was divided by a wall. Especially in the first years following its construction hardly anybody was allowed to pass the border. The states from the Eastern block questioned the legitimacy of the West to act as a representative for the whole Germany. Vice versa, the Western states questioned the legitimacy of the GDR. East and West Germany thus blocked each other to gain full international recognition. Both became just in 1973 full members of the UN and lacked until 1990 a peace treaty with the allied forces which had defeated Germany. As a consequence West-Germany as well as the GDR was neither sovereign nor internationally fully recognized. Especially unclear was the status of West-Berlin which officially neither belonged to East nor West-Germany. It just had survived a blockade by the Soviet Red Army. It did not have any own military and lived therefore in permanent fear of a Soviet invasion. German politicians and the main part of Berlin's population regarded therefore the Shah's visit in 1967 as a sign of support and international recognition.

A third reason for the interest in the Shah's visit was Germany's middle-east policy. As any other industrialized Western nation Germany relied heavily on foreign supply of oil and gas. Due to the economic boom of the early 1960ies the demand was growing. After the revolution in Iraq in 1958 and the 1967 conflict between the Arab states Iran became more and more into the focus as an oil supplying country. Its political situation seemed more stabile than the one of the neighbouring countries. Besides, Iran had for a long time close trade connection to Germany. Even before World War II Germany was the main exporter of goods into Iran. These ties were renewed after the War in the 1950ies and 1960ies and were central to the Shah's plan to further develop Iran's industry. The German industry as well as German politics were interested in these exports as Iran, due to its growing population, was considered as a market with an increasing significance. For both sides West-Germany and Iran the visit was thus important for a variety of historical, political and economic reasons.

4 Major Events

During the whole visit of the Shah in West-Germany the level of security was very high. 30.000 police officers provided the security (Spiegel 41). Train stations were blocked, airports restricted, high-ways closed in order to give the Shah a safe journey. Wherever he emerged, massive police forces accompanied him. The police told restaurants to keep their windows closed (Mager/Spinnarke 112). It demanded from Iranians living in Germany to leave the cities that he visited or put them under house-arrest (Spiegel 41). This caused the overall impression that Germany is in an emergency situation and that its politicians would do everything to please the Shah.

In the morning of the 2nd June the Shah came by airplane from Munich to West-Berlin. He was met by the mayor of West-Berlin Heinrich Albertz. In addition, a group of Persians greeted him. They had come to Berlin in special flights before and were, probably, paid by the Savak, the Iranian Secret Police. They had followed the Shah before and were due to their function derogatorily referred to as "Persian claqueurs". The German police knew about this and cooperated with them.

The opinion of Berlin was split. On the one hand, many citizens were happy about the Shah's visit and felt supported inside a beleaguered city. On the other hand, mainly students were against the Shah as they regarded him as a dictator and close ally to the US. From their point of view he was part of an imperialist alliance responsible for the war in Vietnam. At the eve before the Shah arrived demonstrators protested in front of the Czech Military Mission against Prague's previous warm welcome to the Shah. Members of the Socialist German Student Union (SDS) and of the Confederation of

Iranian Students (CIS) had distributed around the city wanted posters about the Shah with the headline “murder” (Prante 1). Therefore, the situation was already tense before the Shah arrived.

For the day of the visit, the 2nd of June 1967, two events were scheduled: the reception at the Berlin city hall in the afternoon where the Shah got the honour of signing the Golden Book of Berlin and a visit of the opera in the evening. Around 2.30 pm the Shah came to the city hall of West Berlin which was then situated in the area of Schoenberg. In front of the Schoeneberg city hall three groups of demonstrators had gathered. The first one was a group of about 40 Persians claqueurs who arrived in special buses of the city of Berlin. They had the privilege to stand next to the city hall and before the barriers blocking other demonstrators and spectators from the entrance.

The second group waiting for the Shah were students protesting against the Shah’s visit behind the barrier. They were predominantly German as many Iranian students critical of the Shah stood during his visit under house-arrest (Mager/Spinnarke 112), i.e. were not allowed to participate in any action of protest. Altogether they were around 2.000 people which was, compared to the later attention in the media and the numbers of students in Berlin, a rather small number. The third group were German spectators curious to see the Shah and his wife. They were attracted by the glamour of an emperor.

As soon as the Shah arrived the students started to shout “murderer” and to throw eggs in his direction. After the Shah came into the city hall the „Persian claqueurs“ started to beat the protesting students with sticks which they had taken from their banners. Some reports maintain that they also used steel rods (Mager/Spinnarke 108; Dietze 2). This, however, seems unlikely as there are no reports about injured students. The attack by the Persians surprised the students. They expected the German police to interfere. However, when the police arrived it did for a while not act at all and then started to dispel the students. The reason for the non-interference with the Persian claqueurs was, probably, that they did not want to provoke a conflict with the Iranian security forces which would have overshadowed the talks with the Shah. Moreover, the police had cooperated with the Persians before and regarded them as part of the security. The student protestors, however, were shocked not only by the open violence but also by the alliance of the German and Iranian security forces. This caused the impression that German police would, once again and like during the Hitler regime, support a dictator and cooperate with security forces responsible for killing political opponents. However, the students could not know that the Berlin mayor Albertz

protested in front of the Iranian Security Forces about its actions against the students and was given the – later broken – promise that this would not repeat itself in the evening.

The second and even more famous event on the 2nd of June 1967 was the Shah's visit of the Berlin Opera. He arrived there together with his wife shortly before 8 pm (Zimmer 1). The significance of this visit can be seen in the fact the mayor of West Berlin Heinrich Albertz and the West-German president Heinrich Lübcke accompanied him. So the purpose was not just to listen Mozart's "Magic Flute" which was about to be played (Kilb 1). The road in front of the opera was blocked for traffic. Protestors were admitted only to gather at the opposite site of the Bismarck-Street, a broad boulevard with ten tracks so that the Shah could hardly notice the protestors. Nevertheless, the students threw eggs and tomatoes in the direction of the Shah and shouted "murderer", "Mo, Mo, Mossadegh" thereby referring to the mentioned Iranian prime minister that was forced to resign after the Shah returned from exile. As in the morning they were separated from the street by barriers. Once again the "Persian claqueurs" were allowed to greet the Shah close to the opera and beyond the fences for the spectators. Rows of police officers stood in front of the opera and shielded the Shah.

The situation was very tense. The students were upset by the events in the morning, especially by the cooperation between the Persian and German security forces. After being silenced by the media they wanted to express their protest, at least, on the street. The police in turn was in a kind of hysteria. It was neither used to this kind of protest nor trained to handle angry demonstrators. Even the visit of the American vice-president Hubert Humphrey in April 1967 in West-Berlin had not caused a similar protest or conflict. The police felt insulted by the students accusing them by the alliance with a murderer and, sometimes, even spitting on them.

After the Shah went into the opera the students wanted to leave. Their plan was to come back when the Shah would leave the opera and to protest against him once more. The police, however, pursued another plan. It wanted to prevent further protest and, arguably, take revenge of the insults towards it and the Shah as a foreign guest. The tension between them increased after news was spread via loudspeakers that one police officer was stabbed by a student. This turned out to be wrong but incited the police to dispel the students with greater force (Soukup 46). The president of the Berlin police personally gave the order to use truncheons against the demonstrators and the police started to dispel the students by crushing into the middle of the protestors. This caused a panic to flee. Despite this, demonstrators were beaten up, arrested and carried away by

force. The greatest part of them tried to flee in the neighbouring streets. Among them was Benno Ohnesorg a student that had taken part already at the demonstration in the morning. He had not connection to the Socialist German Student Federation that organized the demonstrations. He carried a banner stating “autonomy for the Teheran University” (Wehner 1. His only alliance was with the Protestant Student Community of Berlin. He studied Roman and German Philology; his professors would latter describe him as a quiet and hardworking guy.

At the demonstration he was accompanied by a friend Bering and his pregnant wife (Bering 1). In fleeing from the police he came together with 20-30 other students to the neighbouring street “Krumme Straße”. There he departed from his wife and friend Bering both of which decided to return home. Ohnesorg flew into a yard where other students already were hiding. Police in uniform and in plain cloth closed it and prevented the students to come out of it. The students nevertheless tried to liberate themselves. During this action Ohnesorg was first beaten and then shot by a police officer, Mr. Kurras, in the head. As confirmed by witnesses there was no attack which Kurrad might have prevented by self-defence. A criminal court later acquitted him because of a psychological state of emergency and stated that he had acted illegally (Höntzsch 155). After the shot, Ohnesorg lost blood and consciousness. An ambulance tried to bring him to a hospital but it took more than 45 minutes to find one. Many hospitals denied access out of fear that they would later be accused of helping violent protestors. At the same evening Ohnesorg died.

This news spread immediately trough the whole city. In the beginning the police and the city administration tried to make the students responsible for it. They first insisted that an accident had happened as the gun was supposedly not directed against Ohnesorg. Only gradually they admitted the truth. They were afraid of further protests and prohibited for the next days any demonstration in Berlin. When the Shah was informed by the mayor Albertz on the next morning that a student protestor had died he replied that Albertz should not worry about it - this would happen in Iran on a daily basis. Albertz should shoot more, then he would get some quietness (Soukup 157).

5 Reactions in the Public

The described events caused massive reactions. A great number of poets and publicly known intellectuals commented on them, so, for instance, the later Nobel prize laureate Günther Grass. The theologian Gollwitzer responded in front of the students that they would not tolerate the rise of fascism as indifferently as the youth 35 years before. This nicely mirrored an overall sentiment that the German police and politicians

followed a totalitarian tradition and that it was for the students and youth to change them. The students associated the Shah with the totalitarian politics of the Nazis. This is best expressed in their slogan “Schah-SA-SS” (Trend 1). Before this background professor Gollwitzer criticized that the Shah had been invited to Berlin in the first place: “if Berlin shall be a shop-window of liberty, then we do not need the Shah.” (Mager/Spinnarke 109).

The yellow press naturally showed a different reaction. They held the students responsible for the death of Benno Ohnesorg. “Bild”, the biggest and most influential tabloid, referred to the students as rioters that had carried out an attack and that were not satisfied with quarrels. “They need to see blood.” (Dietze 4). In a similar vein the “Morgenpost” a local tabloid called the students a “hysterical pack of academic teenager” and “trained communist streetfighters” (Dietze 4). It demanded that they should be expelled from the city. The “Berliner Zeitung” another widespread boulevard paper commented about the students “Who produces terror, has to accept rigidity.” (Soukup 155)

These citations showed how close the tension came to hysteria. It was not just a story of the newspapers but represented a widespread feeling. The union of police officers, for instance, demanded to change the “soft” approach towards the students that were abusing their freedom of assembly (Dietze 3). Similarly, the mayor of West-Berlin Albertz accused them of insulting a foreign guest, of causing the death of Ohnesorg and injuries to many police officers. He explicitly appreciated the actions by the police, maintained that it acted proportionately and stated that his patience had come to an end (öntzsch 156). These reactions deepened the already existing gap between the students and the majority of the population. The serious papers gave a more balanced account and criticised the police for using extra-force (For instance, Zimmer 1). The Munich based Abendzeitung, for instance, asked “What kind of inhabitant of Berlin is it that appreciates authoritarian methods which he disapproves of being used beyond the wall?” (Abendzeitung, 7th of June, cited in br-online 1)

Interestingly, the Shah and the Iranian government reacted as well. They demanded from the German government to prosecute all students that had insulted the Shah in criminal courts (Mager/Spinnarke 112.). This demand was unrealistic because of the freedom of speech and freedom of assembly guaranteed by the West-German constitution. However, it showed the expectations of Iran towards German politicians. In a similar vain the Iranian government accused West-Germany that the economic and political ties would deteriorate because of the protests (SWF/SWR 1). As a response the

German Chancellor Kiesinger wrote a letter of apology to the Shah and expressed his sorrow that the students met him with so much hostility (Mager/Spinnarke 112). This showed once more how much German politicians at that time struggled for international recognition. They did not protest against the actions by the Iranian Secret Police that had used violence against the students and thus infringed the sovereignty of the West-German government and City of Berlin. However, it pointed out that the economic ties were as strong as before.

The most important response though came from the students. The Socialist German Student Federation SDS gathered at the same evening in order to discuss the events. At first, they did not know that Ohnesorg was killed. They got this news by a female student Gudrun Ensslin that later came to the meeting (Soukup 150). She demanded immediately to attack a police station and to arm oneself because one could not negotiate with a fascist regime. Her demand was denied. Ensslin later realized her proposals and became a terrorist involved in various murders. Her earlier response at the eve of the 2nd June 1967 showed that her ambition to use violence was present at the very beginning of the student revolution and was thus not just a later response due to the disappointing results of the student revolution. The latter interpretation, however, was firmly established in the public (Ensslin 1). Besides, Ensslin some of the other terrorists referred to the death of Ohnesorg as the starting point for their foundation (Dellwo 1). One of the mayor terrorist groups called itself “movement of the second of June” before it merged with the more famous terrorist “RAF” (the Red Army Fraction).

The overall majority of the students pursued another way. They started a peaceful protest beginning with a funeral march in commemoration of Benno Ohnesorg. Although it was dissolved by the police the students gathered in the university to discuss the events. In virtually all West-German universities protests started in various forms from teach-ins to demonstrations and blockades of the university administrations. For the burial of Benno Ohnesorg over 10.000 students came to a march in Hannover (Mager/Spinnarke 113.). A convoy of cars with the coffin of Ohnesorg and accompanying students moved from West-Berlin to Hannover thereby passing east-German territory. The GDR tried to support their protest by letting the students pass the border without control and without the usual transit visa fees – which was unheard of just a few years after the construction of one of the heaviest guarded borders in Europe. It even arranged members of the Socialist youth organization to stand at the border and to bow in front of Ohnesorg’s corpse. It blocked the highway on the 180 km road from

Berlin to Helmstedt at the border of West-Germany (Soukup 179). Once more this showed to which extent every detail around the 2nd of June 1967 was politicized.

Nowadays a monument stands in front of the house where Ohnesorg was killed. Its inscription says “His death was a symbol for the beginning student and extraparliamentary movement...” (Apin 1) Nobody would guess that the political changes the death brought about were connected to the Persian Shah and Iran located more than 3.500 km from Berlin. Similarly, nobody would guess that 10 years later the Shah would lose its support both from the US and the main parts of Iran’s population and be forced to exile once again. If that fact would be known then, the events could have taken another turn.

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