

An instrument of British meddling in and muddling out of Iran during and after
the First World War - The South Persia Rifles, 1916 to 1921.

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Introduction

In an effort to challenge the German and Turkish threat to British strategic and growing commercial interest in southern Persia, with the agreement of the Persian government in August 1916, the British Foreign Office set about establishing a locally recruited militia force officered mainly by British officers that became known as The South Persia Rifles (SPR). This essay outlines the origins of the SPR, the reasons for its establishment, the internal challenges it faced in recruitment, operations, control and financing. The essay will also present the external challenges the SPR faced from clandestine German operations in tandem with the rise in Persian nationalism and anti-British sentiment from inside and outside the regiment as a result of the war which ultimately led to its disbandment.

British commercial, strategical and political interests in Persia up to the outbreak of war in 1914

During the era of high British colonialism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Persia came to be seen by Britain as a buffer and barrier against French and Russian colonial invasions of India. Protection of British interests in the Indian subcontinent was a key consideration in British alliances with or against Persia.¹ Summarising British strategic interests in Persia, Lord Salisbury stated in 1889. 'Were it not for our possessing India, we should trouble ourselves but little over Persia'.² By 1900, British strategic interests in Persia had grown to 'commercial, political, strategical and telegraphic'.³

Commercial

In 1872, Naser al-Din, Shah of Iran, granted Baron Paul Julius von Reuter, a German-born British subject, a monopoly over exploiting the country's mineral resources, constructing railways and collecting its customs revenue. The move was so unusual in terms of its scope that the then British Foreign Secretary Lord Curzon, famously described the 'Reuter Concession' as 'the most complete and extraordinary surrender of the entire industrial resources of a kingdom into foreign hands that has probably ever been dreamt of, much less accomplished, in history'.⁴ In 1890, the Shah offered a fifty-year-long concession over the production and trade of Iranian tobacco to the British citizen Major G. Talbot. In 1901, the Shah offered a concession to William Knox D'Arcy to exclusively explore and exploit oil in Iran's vast territory, except in the northern provinces that were viewed as Russia's domain of political and economic manoeuvre.⁵ Through the formation of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company in 1908, the British government attempted to monopolize the exploitation and production of Iranian oil in southern Persia.⁶

¹ Behraves, Maysam. "The Formative Years of Anglo-Iranian Relations (1907-1953): Colonial Scramble for Iran and Its Political Legacy," *Digest of Middle East Studies* 21, no. No 2 (Novembr,2012).p.388.

² Olson, W M J. *Anglo-Iranian Relations During World War 1* (London: Frank Cass and Co Ltd, 1984).p.1.

³ Ibid.p.11. In 1899, George Curzon, the British Viceroy of India, summarized British interests in Persia as 'commercial, political, strategical and telegraphic'.

⁴ Behraves. "The Formative Years of Anglo-Iranian Relations (1907-1953): Colonial Scramble for Iran and Its Political Legacy."p.389. See also Curzon, George. *Persia and the Persian Question*, vol. 1 (London: Frank Cass, 1966).p.480.

⁵ Behraves. "The Formative Years of Anglo-Iranian Relations (1907-1953): Colonial Scramble for Iran and Its Political Legacy."p.389.

⁶ Ibid.p.391.

Oilfields in Khuzistan developed by British capital in 1909 were owned by British Admiralty in 1914.⁷ Oil began to be increasingly used in coal-burning battleships. The super Dreadnought *HMS Queen Elizabeth*, laid down in 1912, was the first battleship to burn oil.⁸ Financing this commercial expansion came through the British owned Imperial Bank of Persia. Being one of the two banks in the country, the bank was incorporated by Royal British Charter in 1889, printed Iranian money and made loans to Persian government. The other bank was virtually a Russian government institution and with branches in all the important towns, filled an important part in Russian policy.⁹

Strategical and Political

After many years of British–Russian rivalry over Persia, following the nationalist Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1906, which both Britain and Russia perceived as a threat to their interests in the country, the Anglo-Russian Treaty was signed in 1907. The agreement, as far as the British were concerned, was determined by strategic and financial common sense,¹⁰ hence the development of Anglo-Persian Oil Company in 1908 and the Imperial Bank of Persia. The treaty divided Persia into a northern and southern spheres of influence as well as a central neutral zone in the middle.¹¹ Outwardly at least, Britain did not wish to see Persia partitioned. However privately, the Foreign Office had ceased to regard Persia as an independent nation. The Shah’s cabinets were seen as mere tools of foreign powers.¹² The British believed the treaty had secured the approaches to India. The Iranians regarded the treaty as an unmitigated disaster which opened the dangers of partition.

⁷ Olson.p.12. In 1913, the Anglo-Persian Oil Company secured the contract to supply the British Admiralty with fuel oil. See Strachan, Hew. *The First World War, to Arms!* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001),p.774.

⁸ Safiri, Floreeda. “The South Persian Rifles” (University of Edinburgh, 1976),p.5. In 1909, the first flotilla of ocean-going destroyers wholly dependent on oil was created and oil began to be increasingly used in coal-burning battleships and cruisers.

⁹ Moberly, Brigadier-General F J. *Official History of the Great War Military Operations - Operations in Persia 1914-1919* (London: Imperial War Museum, 1929),p.9.

¹⁰ Strachan.p.19.

¹¹ Behraves. "The Formative Years of Anglo-Iranian Relations (1907-1953): Colonial Scramble for Iran and Its Political Legacy." p.389.

¹² Strachan.p.774. The reality was that de facto Persia was partitioned. In March 1915, Britain and France under the Constantinople Agreement agreed that Russia should have control of Constantinople and the straits after the war. In exchange, Britain secured a tightening of British control in the Persian Gulf. The partition of Persia was thus complete. See *ibid.* p.778.

They suffered the fate of a small, weak state; caught between the interests of powerful rivals. Its interest did not matter.¹³ Pressure on the treaty emerged between Russia and Britain with the presence of oil in the neutral zone outside the respective spheres of influence.¹⁴ However, Britain attempted to shelve any problems with Russia until after the war so that their alliance could proceed harmoniously with the defeat of Germany.¹⁵ British strategy in the near east at the outbreak of war in 1914 was firstly to defend the vital communication routes and supply channels between Britain and British India.¹⁶ And secondly, to protect the newly discovered Persian oil which was used to power the Royal Navy and further its war campaign from falling into alien hands.¹⁷

Concern of the approaches, lines of communication and security of India formed the basis of all British interests in Iran, in the Persian Gulf region and in much of the Middle East.¹⁸ In the years leading up to the First World War, route lines of marches, strategic lines of supply though Persia to India and geographic features were all the subject of study of British Indian Army officers. Iran and the Persian Gulf were better studied and their features more minutely catalogued than many other regions within the British Empire such as South Africa, Canada or Australia.¹⁹ One of the major telegraphic communication cables to India ran through Iran and was regularly surveyed and monitored by British Indian Army officers.²⁰

In order to implement this strategy, British policy at the beginning of the war was to secure Persia's active friendliness and:²¹

1. To come to an agreement with the Persian Government. Essentially the British wanted Persia quiet so they could get on with the war elsewhere. Offering advice to C .J. Edmonds, a young English officer bound for southern Persia to take up a position, Sir Percy Cox stated, 'Good bye my boy...do your best to keep the place quiet'.²²

¹³ Olson.p.9.

¹⁴ Ibid.p.18. For example Oilfields in Khuzistan were developed by British capital in 1909.

¹⁵ Ibid.p.37. See also Safiri.p.10.

¹⁶ Olson.p.14.

¹⁷ Behraves. "The Formative Years of Anglo-Iranian Relations (1907-1953): Colonial Scramble for Iran and Its Political Legacy."p.389.

¹⁸ Olson.p.13.

¹⁹ Ibid.p.13.

²⁰ Ibid.p.13.

²¹ Ibid.p.152. For further discussion on British foreign policy on Persia during the war, see also Moberly. particularly pages 269 and 342.

²² Olson.p.154.

2. Establish arrangements with local officials and tribal leaders in the absence of government authority. Much to the annoyance and disregard of the Persian administration, the British set up agreements with selected tribes, interfered with local tribal politics, removed some tribal leaders and inserted their own leaders favourable to their interests.²³ To protect their oilfields for example, the British set up treaties with Shaykh Khazal of Khorramshahr in south western Iran and maintained contact with others.²⁴
3. Raise local levies from Persian tribes.
4. Resort to direct force when all else failed. Much like the Russians in northern Persia, in order to protect their interests, the British were quite prepared to enforce law and order. For example, Bushir was occupied on 8 August 1915. Martial law was imposed and the local Gendarme ordered to evacuate their post.²⁵ The town was handed back to the Persians on 18 October on the grounds that 'order would be maintained in future'.²⁶

The origins of The South Persia Rifles (SPR).

The *raison d'être* of the SPR arose from the challenges and threats to British strategic interests in southern Persia from the Central Powers that emerged during the First World War. With the outbreak of war in 1914, the general policy of the Central Powers was to embarrass and challenge Britain and Russia by creating disturbances in Persia, in Afghanistan, and on the frontiers of India and to jockey Persia into the war on their side. Their strategy was twofold. Agents furnished with ample funds and supplies of arms and ammunition were to enlist levies and create anarchy throughout the country. They were to murder British and Russian representatives, drive out British and Russian colonies, and seize their money and property.²⁷ The main military challenge the British faced in southern Persia came from the Germans and not the Turks.²⁸

²³ Ibid.Pp.20-21.

²⁴ Ibid.p.33.

²⁵ Safiri.p.55.

²⁶ Ibid.p.57.

²⁷ Sykes, Percy. "South Persia and the Great War," *The Geographical Journal, The Royal Geographical Society* 58, no. No 2 (August, 1921).p.102.

²⁸ Ibid.p.102.See also Safiri.Pp.65-66. The Turks attempted to destroy the oil pipelines at Abadan owned by the Anglo-Persian Oil Company and entered Kermanshah expelling the British and Russian Consuls in April 1915.

Before the war, both Britain and Germany considered Persia weak.²⁹ The German ambassador in Tehran considered Persia was a country ‘without patriotic energy and for the moment powerless’.³⁰ The British Foreign Office considered the Persian regime to be, ‘a dilapidated Oriental monarchy staffed by vacillating incompetents, dilatory fools and mendacious schemers whose only aim was self-aggrandizement’.³¹ Years of financial difficulties, political unrest and foreign encroachment had robbed Persian central authority of most of its vigour and authority.³² Political rule in the country was fractious. Sixteen Persian cabinets were formed during the four years of war.³³ The Persian Army in 1914 reflected the dilapidated state of the country. It amounted to about 13,000 men under arms and scattered throughout the country in many detachments. Its rank and file were generally unpaid, under-supplied, over-officered and untrained. It was the subject of rude jokes for fifty years.³⁴ The officers were considered useless, their appointment being solely due to purchase or patronage without any regard to their age or efficiency.³⁵ Persia’s weakness was a threat to the security of British India.³⁶

Persia’s inability to control law and order, coupled with the demand for the security of Britain’s growing commercial interests, its consuls and trade routes in the south, led to the creation of gendarmerie officered by Swedes.³⁷ It was necessary to employ neutrals because the Russians and the British would not accept officers from any of the Great Powers. In 1911, the Persians agreed to set up the Swedish Gendarmerie financed largely by the British to operate in the south.³⁸ The gendarmerie consisted of six regiments, three of which had two battalions. At the beginning of 1914 their numbers totalled thirty-six Swedish officers and about 6,000 mounted and dismounted Persians, armed with Mauser carbines, four mountain guns and about a dozen machine guns. They operated in the districts of Tehran, Fars, Kerman, Isfahan and Kazvin.³⁹

²⁹ For further discussion on pre-war Anglo-Persian relations, see McLean, David. *Britain and Her Buffer State. The Collapse of the Persian Empire, 1890-1914* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1979).

³⁰ Strachan.p.772.

³¹ Olson.p.28.

³² Ibid.p.28.

³³ Strachan.p.774.

³⁴ Olson.p.28.

³⁵ Moberly.p.15.

³⁶ Olson.p.ix.

³⁷ Safiri.p.21 In August 1910, attacks on foreign residents and robberies on roads became more frequent. The British acting consul in Ahvaz, Mr.J.H.Bill, was attacked on the road near Abadeh on 15 April 1910 and two of his Indian Sowars (Indian Army Cavalry Trooper) were killed.

³⁸ Olson.p.14. See also Safiri.pp.21-22.

³⁹ Moberly.p.16.

Finally and perhaps most importantly, Persia's weakness at the outbreak of war in 1914 offered Germany an opportunity and space in which to carry out seditious acts against her main enemy Britain.

At the outbreak of war, using Afghanistan as a base from which to launch her seditious campaign against Britain, German action was focused on India and not southern Persia. In believing that British rule in India could be undermined from Afghanistan, as early as July 1914, the Germans had considered sending agents to stir up sedition in India.⁴⁰ Consequently at the outbreak of war, German policy focused on Afghanistan, not Persia.⁴¹ By late August 1914, the German foreign office had assembled a team of fifteen people to send to Afghanistan.⁴² They first travelled to Constantinople disguised as a travelling circus.⁴³ Their objective was to induce the Amir of Afghanistan to create trouble for the British in India. It was hoped that ultimately, Persia and the Muslim population of her neighbouring countries would unite under the banner of Pan-Islam, backed by German arms and money and wage war by proxy against Russia and Britain.⁴⁴

By October 1914, the focus of German sedition moved from India to Persia.⁴⁵ Their activity, which mainly consisted of political interference and para-military type operations against the British, intensified in 1915. In early 1915, German consuls in towns of central and southern Persia cast off their diplomatic credentials and openly agitated on behalf of the Central Powers.⁴⁶ German consular agents began to meet with Iranian nationalists to politically inflame anti-Allied sentiments.⁴⁷

⁴⁰ Olson.p.50.

⁴¹ Strachan.p.771. For discussion on where Persia and Afghanistan fitted into Germany's global strategy. See Strachan . Pp. 770 - 791.

⁴² Olson.p.50.

⁴³ Strachan.p.771.

⁴⁴ Safiri.p.32. One must wonder did the Kaiser read John Buchan's adventure book *Greenmantle* published in 1916.

⁴⁵ Strachan.p.774. However, the Germans did not lose all interest in India. In early October 1915, through agreement with the Turks, Field-Marshal Colmar von der Goltz Pasha, (1843-1916) who, at the age of seventy-two and recalled from retirement and commanded the Turkish 6th Army in Mesopotamia, was given the task to prepare for an independent war against India. To this end he was to win Persia to the Central Powers, to drive out the British and Russians in the process, to secure Persia's freedom and independence, and to establish the foundations of a Persian army. Ibid. p.784. Following the Arab revolt against the Ottoman Empire in June 1916, the project was abandoned. See. Hughes, Thomas. "The German Mission to Afghanistan,1915-1916," *German Studies Review, The John Hopkins Universirt Press* 25, no. No.3 (October,2002).p.472.

⁴⁶ Strachan.p.779.

⁴⁷ Olson.p.50.

Persian newspapers and private presses sympathetic to the Nationalist cause published anti-Allied declarations and appeals to Muslim brotherhood; some of them endorsed jihad and publically sympathised with Germany.⁴⁸ The German Foreign Minister Arthur Zimmermann promised 50,000 marks to fund a rebellion in Persia led by a discredited exiled Persian prince.⁴⁹ The Germans offered gold, promises of victory and liberation, with the aim of creating a large force in Persia to co-operate with Turkish forces.⁵⁰ This project failed due to the lack of support on the ground from tribesmen and resentment of some Persians, particularly Christians such as Armenian and Assyrians who were against the Turks.⁵¹ However, there were pro-German sympathies in Tehran such as Persian Nationalist Party who sided with the Germans mainly because they were deliberately kept out of power in successive Persian administrations.⁵² In April 1915, German agents initiated a run on the silver reserves of the Imperial Bank of Persia.⁵³ By the end of 1915, seven branches of the bank were in German hands.⁵⁴ In November 1915, German agents in co-operation with Persian nationalists tried to gain control of the Persian government by persuading the Shah to their side. The coup failed because the Shah decided to remain in Tehran and for his country remain neutral in the war.⁵⁵ Under the leadership of the Anglophile, Farman Farma, who lead the Persian government in December 1915, Tehran remained an Entente enclave for much of the war.⁵⁶

In some areas German agents began hiring and arming tough local brigands and tribal groups to act as para-military forces and give added protection to their lines of communication.⁵⁷

⁴⁸ Ibid.p.51. For example Persian nationalist newspapers in Fars targeted the Persian officers and recruits of the Fars Brigade of the SPR by highlight their suspicions of British ultimate motivations in taking control of Fars entirely from the Persians. See Safiri.p.124.

⁴⁹ Strachan.p.774.

⁵⁰ Safiri.p.32.

⁵¹ Ibid.p.40.

⁵² Ibid.p.49 and p.87. See also Strachan.p.774. Persian nationalists, as the opponents of Britain and Russia, were the natural ally of the Central Powers, but rejected Turkey because of her expansionist ambitions. See *ibid.* p.778.

⁵³ Strachan.p.785.

⁵⁴ Sykes. "South Persia and the Great War."p.103.

⁵⁵ Strachan.p.787. On 1 November 1914, the Shah responded to Turkey's entry to the war by declaring Persia neutral which technically remained unchanged throughout the war. *Ibid.* Pp.774/5/ See also Safiri.p.11.

⁵⁶ Strachan.p.788.

⁵⁷ Olson.p.52.

They attempted to raise and drill Mujhadis (National Guards) but were thwarted by the British.⁵⁸ Pro-German nationalist forces seized the city of Hamadan in western Iran with little resistance from its Russian Cossack guardians.⁵⁹ In January 1915, a German agent named Fritz Klein, former military attaché in Tehran, was sent by Berlin to seize the oil refinery at Abada and rouse Shite tribes to a holy war against the British.⁶⁰ In July 1915, Captain Wilhelm Wassmuss carried out espionage operations and organising local forces in southern Persia. He gathered about 350 Tangistani tribesmen led by Rais Ali Delvari and attacked the British residency buildings at Rishahr and Bushihr.⁶¹ He operated in the region over the next four years causing the British considerable embarrassment, so much so that he was often considered the German Lawrence of Arabia.⁶² By the end of 1915, the British had been almost driven out of central and southern Persia, and only remained at the ports owing to the protection afforded by troops and gunboats.⁶³

However, despite their sporadic success in challenging the British in southern Persia, overall the German objectives failed. By the spring of 1916, Shiraz, Isfahan and Kerman were back in Persian and pro-British control. Despite Persian nationalist sentiments, the Germans found it difficult to recruit local levies. At the beginning of 1916, the number of Germans and Austrians in Persia and Afghanistan, together with their assortment of levies travelling with them only amounted to just over 1,600. Of this number about 196 were Germans and Austrians, over 1,300 were Persians and the rest Turks, Afghans, and some Indians.⁶⁴ Persian tribesmen who sided with the Germans were untrained in modern warfare; they were not nationalists, their allegiance deepened on the amount of money the Germans were willing to pay. Moreover, they did not like operating outside their own tribal areas.⁶⁵ By the middle of 1916, the German role in Persia rapidly declined.⁶⁶

⁵⁸ Safiri.p.52.

⁵⁹ Olson.p.156. To police their northern region of Persia, the Russians placed Russian troops or the Russian officered Persian Cossack Brigade which they created as a political rather than a military weapon.

⁶⁰ Strachan.p.779. Klein's mission failed because the British had secured the oil fields before he got there. However, on February 1915, his group operating with Turkish soldiers, managed to damage the Karun pipeline. Ibid.p.780.

⁶¹ Safiri.p.52. See also Strachan.p.771. and p.781. The attack petered out the next day and British troops had found the attackers had dispersed. See Olson.p.93.

⁶² Olson.p.52. See also Strachan.p.780. Wassmuss was a former consul in Shiraz on the Persian Gulf and originally a member of the German expedition to Afghanistan who could speak Farsi,

⁶³ Sykes. "South Persia and the Great War." p.103. See also Strachan.p.781.

⁶⁴ Safiri.p.105.

⁶⁵ Strachan.p.782. Germany distributed about 50 million marks in Persia and Afghanistan during the war.

⁶⁶ Hughes. "The German Mission to Afghanistan, 1915-1916." p.472.

Many of their agents escaped back to Germany.⁶⁷ By January 1917, the only German agent who was not caught at this point and continued to frustrate British work in the south, was Captain Wilhelm Wassmuss.⁶⁸

Faced with these challenges the Germans presented to the British in southern Persia, coupled with the breakdown of law and order in the south, the threat to the oilfields pipelines, telegraphic lines and personnel and Turks in Mesopotamia, could only lead to one thing – the British taking control of their own security. In facing these challenges, the Minister for Persia In January 1916, Marling proposed that instead of tampering with any further schemes with the Swedes and the Gendarmerie, the Persian Government should be told of the formation of a corps under British officers or instructors. The Foreign Office and the India Office agreed unanimously.⁶⁹ Sir Charles Marling noted in a letter to the Foreign Office in late July 1915, ‘we must show strength’.⁷⁰ There were other motivations that lead to the formation of this new British-officered force such as restoration of British prestige in the east following their defeat in Gallipoli⁷¹ and to counter-balance the threatening Cossack Brigade and Russian influence in Persia.⁷²

⁶⁷ Ibid.p.475. Niedermayer made a daring escape from Afghanistan westward through Russian Turkestan and Persia, wounded, using disguise at time reduced to begging before he reached friendly lines with the Turko-German forces in Kermanshah. After the war Niedermayer was knighted for his services and given the Max Joseph Order, Bavaria’s highest honour. The escape and journey back to Berlin of his German partner Werner Otto von Hentig, is worthy of a Kipling-type novel of journey through the storms and ice of the Hindu Kush, through the heat and sands of Gobi Desert into China and Shanghai and on an American ship to Honolulu. On his return to Berlin he was awarded the Hohenzollern House Order by the Kaiser.

⁶⁸ Safiri.p105.

⁶⁹ Ibid.p.78. The Swedish Gendarmerie proved an unmitigated disaster for Britain during the war when most of the force defected to the Germans, refusing even to obey instructions from the Persian Government. See Olson.p.152. Their defection did not reflect Swedish government neutrality policy in WW1. In fact in December 1915, the Swedish government recalled its Regular officers from Persia. The result was to leave about twenty Reserve officers behind who sided with the Germans. See Strachan.p.781. Moreover in winter of 1915, in an attempt to break Persian neutrality in favour of the Central Powers, the greater part of the Persian gendarmerie force under the command of Swedish and Persian officers linked arms with nationalist and pro-German political elements. Safiri.p.12.

⁷⁰ Olson.p.95. The Swedish Gendarmerie proved an unmitigated disaster for Britain during the war when most of the force defected to the Germans, refusing even to obey instructions from the Persian Government. See *ibid*.p.152. Their defection did not reflect Swedish government neutrality policy in WW1. In fact in December 1915, the Swedish government recalled its Regular officers from Persia. The result was to leave about twenty Reserve officers behind who sided with the Germans. See Strachan.p.781. Moreover in winter of 1915, in an attempt to break Persian neutrality in favour of the Central Powers, the greater part of the Persian gendarmerie force under the command of Swedish and Persian officers linked arms with nationalist and pro-German political elements. Safiri.p.12

⁷¹ Safiri.p.82. See also Olson.p.26.

⁷² Safiri.p.2. The Russians treated northern Iran as if it was a Russian province. In 1911, the Russians had placed approximately 10,000 troops in their northern zone. See *ibid*.p.6. They expelled and executed Persian dissidents collected taxes, appointed local officials. See Olson.p.16. In June 1914, Sir Edward Grey described northern Persia, and specifically Azerbaijan, as ‘a Russian province ruled by Russian officials’. See Strachan.p.773. Even during the war London saw Russia as a post-war threat. According to a senior official at the Foreign Office:

It wasn't until early August 1916 that arrangements were made with the Persian administration to raise a force of Persian troops under British officers in the south, and, to increase the Persian Cossack brigade in the north, the figure aimed at being 11,000 in both cases.⁷³ Prior to this agreement, responsibility for military protecting British interests in southern Persia lay with the Indian Army.⁷⁴ Both forces would operate during the war nominally as Persian forces under the orders of the Persian Ministry of War, and the two powers agreed to give the Persian government a loan of 200,000 tumans (66,000 Pounds Sterling in September 1918) for their maintenance.⁷⁵

The agreement was extremely unpopular in Persia and was never fully accepted by the Persian cabinet.⁷⁶ As far as the Persians were concerned, the proposed force was a symbol of Persian humiliation and of the inexorable partition of their country. The force became a point of conflict in Anglo-Persian discontent and a reminder of the reality and symbol of the British presence in southern Persia. As such, the Persians resisted recognition of the force. They wanted an all-Persian force or at least officered by neutrals under Persian control. They didn't want another Cossack Brigade type force operating in their country outside their control.⁷⁷ This discontent was reflected even in the choice of the name itself: after some initial debate, the force was named and referred to in official correspondence as South Persian Rifles emphasising the word Persian in order to avoid any implicit reference to the division of Persia into the two spheres and to stress that it was a Persian and not a British force.

'If we continually call on Russia to defend us in Persia we weaken our power of resisting her copious appetite for subsequent rewards there'. See Olson.Pp.167-168.

⁷³ Sykes. "South Persia and the Great War."p.104. This agreement was called the Sipahsalar Agreement named after the pro-Allied Persian prime minister Sepahdār-e Tonekāboni (Moḥammad-Wali Khan Tonekāboni, Sepahdār and later Sepahsālār-e A'zam), In 1914, the Persian Cossack Brigade, with about thirty Russian officers and non-commissioned officers, totalled approximately 3,500. See Moberly.p.15. In 1911, the Russians had placed approximately 10,000 troops in their northern zone. See Safiri.p.6. Even during the war London saw Russia as a post-war threat. According to a senior official at the Foreign Office: 'If we continually call on Russia to defend us in Persia we weaken our power of resisting her copious appetite for subsequent rewards there'. See Olson.Pp.167-168.

⁷⁴ Strachan.p775. See also Safiri. p.53.To protect their growing commercial interest in pre-War Persia, the British had stationed small bodies of Indian (Baluchi) troops at Bushir and Bandar Abbas in the Gulf who undertook punitive action against non-cooperating Gulf tribes between 1909 and 1913. In 1907 the Central India Horse, a cavalry unit, were sent to protect drillers at a recently developed oil rig in the south-west. Ibid.Introduction p.2.

⁷⁵ Safiri, Floreeda. "South Persia Rifles [Http://Www.Iranicaonline.Org/Articles/South-Persia-Rifles-Militia](http://www.Iranicaonline.Org/Articles/South-Persia-Rifles-Militia)", Centre for Iranian Studies, Columbia University (2008). One Iranian Tuman = 0.33 Pounds Sterling or a little over six shillings.

⁷⁶ Cronin, Stephanie. "Britain, the Iranian Military, and the Rise of Reza Khan," in *Anglo-Iranian Relations since 1880*, ed. Vanessa Martin(London and New York: Routledge, 2005).p.113.

⁷⁷ Olson.p.155.

However the more common if unofficial South Persia Rifles ultimately won the day and became the designation while in Persian it was referred to as Polis-e jonub-e Iran.⁷⁸

Recruitment into the South Persia Rifles

The task of recruiting, training and equipping the SPR fell to Brigadier-General Sir Percy Sykes (1867-1945) who was an officer in the Indian Army that had experience in Persian affairs.⁷⁹ According to Sykes himself his mission was, 'to create a force [of local recruits] for the restoration of law and order in the interests of the Persian and the British Governments'.⁸⁰ Indian troops would be used until the force was sufficiently trained.⁸¹

Sykes began his work of raising the SPR in the small Persian Gulf port town of Bandar Abbas where he arrived with an escort of British and Indian officers and NCOs in mid-March 1916.⁸² Within a month he had recruited just over 300. It wasn't until 28 April did he receive reinforcement so as to move inland to Shiraz.⁸³ The Imperial Government provided him with sixteen Persian speaking officers and a reserve of ten more joined the force early in 1917.⁸⁴ The first regiment of the South Persia Rifles was raised at Naiband and was mainly composed of Persian, Baluch and Arab men from the inhabitants of Bandar Abbas and its environs. The first brigade of the SPR was formed when Sykes arrived at Kerman during the summer and autumn of 1916.⁸⁵

⁷⁸ Safiri, "South Persia Rifles [Http://Www.Iranicaonline.Org/Articles/South-Persia-Rifles-Militia](http://www.Iranicaonline.Org/Articles/South-Persia-Rifles-Militia)".

⁷⁹ Olson.Pp.158-159. See also p.176. For years Sykes had travelled in Persia chronicling his discoveries and had served as Consul-General in Mashad in north-eastern Persia. He was recommended for the job by the Viceroy of India, Lord Hardinge

⁸⁰ Safiri. "The South Persian Rifles". p.1.

⁸¹ Moberly.p.237.

⁸² Sykes. "South Persia and the Great War."p.104.

⁸³ Olson.p.162. See also Safiri, "South Persia Rifles [Http://Www.Iranicaonline.Org/Articles/South-Persia-Rifles-Militia](http://www.Iranicaonline.Org/Articles/South-Persia-Rifles-Militia)". Shiraz was the most important city in southern Persia. In November 1915, Persian nationalists had arrested the British community. The British officers that arrived in the spring of 1917 were Colonel E . F. Orton and Lieut.-Colonel G. P. Grant. The 16th Rajputs of the Indian Army had three squadrons of Burma Mounted Rifles composed of Punjabis mounted on small but sturdy Burmese ponies. See Sykes. "South Persia and the Great War." p.109.

⁸⁴ Safiri. "The South Persian Rifles".p.95.

⁸⁵ Ibid.Pp.113-114.

Men were recruited on a voluntary basis for a period of three years.⁸⁶ Recruitment came from three sources. Firstly, tribal leaders of the Qashqai (the Arabs of Khuzistan) such as Saulat al-Dauleh who, following bribes, offered their tribesmen to fight with the British.⁸⁷ Bribing or subsidising tribesmen became a means of recruitment. Levies were paid for their support of fifteen tumans, including rations and forage. The average pay for an infantry recruit was 'ten tumans per mensem' which was roughly equivalent to a little over three pounds per month.⁸⁸ The Germans were doing the same thing and often had to be outbid for loyalty. This practice carried on for the first two years of the SPR existence.⁸⁹

Secondly, individuals or small groups from levy corps enlisted.⁹⁰ These were men who had served in other government military or police forces, including ex-gendarmes. They were mostly non-locals and in the early stages formed the bulk of the commissioned ranks of the force. When Sykes got to Shiraz, some twenty-eight officers and 2,100 men of the Swedish Gendarmes Brigade of Fars enlisted.⁹¹ Persian officers in this cohort were mainly Tehranis, distinctly better educated than Indian officers with knowledge of French or English in some cases.⁹²

The third source of recruits came from the unemployed or semi-employed population of the towns and the countryside, whom Colonel Hugh Gough described as, 'belonging to the low classes in the bazaars, bakers' assistance and small shop-keeper's Hammals'.⁹³ The chief motivation for joining the force was money and regular pay.⁹⁴ For other recruits, a steady source of food was the motivation. Crop failures in Fars in between 1914 and 1916 ensured a steady flow of recruits.⁹⁵ These men had joined the force more because of a desire for a better means of livelihood than the desire to support the British-sponsored campaign for the restoration of order. This presented doubts of loyalty, since on many occasions they were asked to fight against their own countrymen and tribesmen.

⁸⁶ Ibid.p.113.

⁸⁷ Olson.p.154.

⁸⁸ Safiri. "The South Persian Rifles".p.113. In September 1918, 1 Toman or Tuman = 0.33 Pounds Sterling or a little over six shillings. See Sabahi, Houshang. *British Policy in Persia 1918-1925* (London: Frank Cass and Co Ltd, 1990).p.21.

⁸⁹ Safiri. "The South Persian Rifles".p.116.

⁹⁰ Olson.p.154.

⁹¹ Safiri. "The South Persian Rifles".p.259.

⁹² Ibid.p122.

⁹³ Safiri, "South Persia Rifles [Http://Www.Iranicaonline.Org/Articles/South-Persia-Rifles-Militia](http://www.Iranicaonline.Org/Articles/South-Persia-Rifles-Militia)".See also Safiri. "The South Persian Rifles".p.127. Hammals were Arab porters. Colonel Hugh Gough was the British Consul in Shiraz.

⁹⁴ Safiri. "The South Persian Rifles".p.113.

⁹⁵ Ibid.p.127.

To counteract this possibility, men were deployed away from their own tribal lands. This too created problems as recruits were often reluctant to serve away from their own localities.⁹⁶ There were no pensions or gratuities on completion of service. However, in the case of death or injury, the recruit or his heirs received a gratuity according to the man's rank and circumstances of the heir.⁹⁷

Initial ambitions for the force was a strength of 11,000 men split between two brigades, one in Kerman and the other in Fars. Each brigade would comprise of infantry, cavalry, a machine gun company, an engineer field company and artillery made up of field artillery and mountain battery because of potential fighting in mountainous districts of these provinces.⁹⁸ Although the force was structured into two brigades namely the Kerman Brigade and Fars Brigade, the ambitious number of 11,000 was not fulfilled. By 1 December 1916, Sir Percy Sykes reported that the strength of the force, including levies and ex-gendarmerie, was as follows: ⁹⁹

Fars Area.	450 cavalry, 2,000 infantry, 2 guns and a machine gun.
Kerman Area.	550 cavalry, 550 infantry and 4 guns
Bandar Abbas.	50 cavalry and 100 infantry.
Total.	3,700

By June 1917, the strength of the SPR had risen to 4,450 Persian combatant rank and file of which 2,500 belonged to the Fars Brigade whose headquarters was in Shiraz.¹⁰⁰ The Kerman Brigade had grown to 1,900 strong and with a strong detachment at Saidabad. The Bandar Abbas battalion had also grown to 650 strong.¹⁰¹ By August 1917, the SPR had reached just over 5,500 in which there were seventy British officers and eighty-four NCOs on various duties in Headquarters' Staff as Medical or Veterinary Officers or Supply and Transport.¹⁰² Persian officers amounted to 117.¹⁰³

⁹⁶ Ibid.p.118.

⁹⁷ Ibid.p.113.

⁹⁸ Moberly.Pp.236-237. This estimate was stated in a memorandum written on 26 May 1917 by Colonel Orton in consultation with Sir Percy Sykes on the duties and organisation of the South Persia Rifles.

⁹⁹ Ibid.p.211.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.p.246 and p.266.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.p.266.

¹⁰² Ibid.p.266.

¹⁰³ Ibid.p.476 and p4.77 Appendix III.

By the spring of 1918, the force had reached over 6,000. At its peak it totalled approximately 8,000 men.¹⁰⁴ One of the British officers was a Dublin Fusilier named Thomas Sherwood who before the war worked as a clerk in the Commercial Union Assurance Company's office in Dublin. At the age of twenty-eight, Sherwood's motivation for enlistment in September 1914 was adventure. He served with the famous 'D' Company of the 7th Royal Dublin Fusiliers in Gallipoli and Salonicka.¹⁰⁵ Commissioned from the ranks, he was sent to the Kerman Brigade.¹⁰⁶

Challenges encountered by the South Persia Rifles

The SPR faced many challenges. From the start of the recruitment drive, some 80% of the recruits offering to join were rejected on medical grounds.¹⁰⁷ For a variety of reasons such as unwillingness to serve away from home, loyalty was a challenge to the establishment and continuance of the SPR.¹⁰⁸ The general policy was to purify the force and to gradually weed out the more unreliable and undesirable recruits. Thus, between 1917 and 1918 some 500 ex-gendarmes were dismissed and a completely new squadron of the 3rd Cavalry was raised at Abada.¹⁰⁹

Despite the threat of the death penalty, desertions were frequent. On the 18 April 1918, a number of SPR deserted from Abada leaving a letter indicating political reasons for their action.¹¹⁰ At one point the Fars Brigade was reduced to a third of its normal strength.¹¹¹ Mutinies occurred in May and July 1918. On 6 July 1918, fourteen men were found guilty of taking part in murder and mutiny at Kana Zenya.¹¹²

¹⁰⁴ Safiri, "South Persia Rifles [Http://Www.Iranicaonline.Org/Articles/South-Persia-Rifles-Militia](http://www.Iranicaonline.Org/Articles/South-Persia-Rifles-Militia)". See also Moberly,p.251. and p.266.

¹⁰⁵ "Sherwood,2nd Lieut,Thomas Barlow 7th Royal Dublin Fusiliers and South Persia Rifles," (Dublin: RDFA Archive).

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. See also "Sherwood,Thomas See. Wo339/70379," (London: Public Records Office).

¹⁰⁷ Moberly,p.251.

¹⁰⁸ Safiri, "South Persia Rifles [Http://Www.Iranicaonline.Org/Articles/South-Persia-Rifles-Militia](http://www.Iranicaonline.Org/Articles/South-Persia-Rifles-Militia)". See Olson.p.255.

¹⁰⁹ Safiri. "The South Persian Rifles".p.152.

¹¹⁰ Moberly,p.293. The men were from the 5th Infantry Battalion. See Safiri. "The South Persian Rifles".p.267.

¹¹¹ Safiri. "The South Persian Rifles".p.151.

¹¹² Safiri, "South Persia Rifles [Http://Www.Iranicaonline.Org/Articles/South-Persia-Rifles-Militia](http://www.Iranicaonline.Org/Articles/South-Persia-Rifles-Militia)". The mutiny was fuelled by events on the Western Front when news of the 1918 German March offensive reached Persia. According to Sykes, the Persian government 'was unfriendly, and intense propaganda' incentivised the SPR to mutiny. Sykes. "South Persia and the Great War."p.112.

As a lesson, they were executed by men from their own battalion.¹¹³ These shootings resulted in public outcry which fuelled anti-British sentiments.¹¹⁴ In places there was a lack of public support for the SPR. Villagers were reluctant to cooperate with the Rifles stating that; ‘Gendarmes come and go but the robbers are always with us’.¹¹⁵ Mistrust occurred between British and Persian officers. Lieut.-Col. F Orton, who took command of the Fars Brigade doubted the fighting quality of these ‘well born’ politically minded Tehranis officers who were, ‘too full of vices, too lazy to learn and inordinately conceited’ always quick to think they knew everything there was to learn. However, to run the SPR, they were needed.¹¹⁶ The SPR was trained and ‘moulded on British lines’, in the English language and ‘according to English methods.’¹¹⁷ Consequently training the new Persian recruits proved difficult because of language difficulties.

Disputes between London and Delhi over the control and financing also proved challenging. Responsibility for the maintenance of the SPR rested with the Government of India but it operated under the control of the Foreign Office in London through the British Legation in Tehran.¹¹⁸ Protecting her own interests, Delhi wanted the SPR to restore order in eastern Persia and bring security to India’s frontier. London wanted to restore order in order to protect British commercial interests and prestige in southern Persia, while at the same time, appearing to serve the interests of the Persian government who refused to recognise the SPR.¹¹⁹ Leaving the Persians aside, a compromise was reached between London and Delhi whereby they shared the cost of running the SPR. According to Olson, Britain spent on average 100,000 pounds a week on the force.¹²⁰

¹¹³ Safiri. "The South Persian Rifles".p.267.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.p.254.

¹¹⁵ Safiri, "South Persia Rifles [Http://Www.Iranicaonline.Org/Articles/South-Persia-Rifles-Militia](http://www.Iranicaonline.Org/Articles/South-Persia-Rifles-Militia)".See also Safiri. "The South Persian Rifles".p.146.

¹¹⁶ Safiri. "The South Persian Rifles".p.122.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.p.122, p.124, p.171.

¹¹⁸ Safiri, "South Persia Rifles [Http://Www.Iranicaonline.Org/Articles/South-Persia-Rifles-Militia](http://www.Iranicaonline.Org/Articles/South-Persia-Rifles-Militia)".

¹¹⁹ Olson.p.159.See Also Sykes. "South Persia and the Great War."p.112.

¹²⁰ Olson.p.196. Another estimate was put at 30,000,000 pounds per annum between April 1916 and January 1919. See Safiri. "The South Persian Rifles".p.278.

Areas of operation, nature of activities and demise of the South Persia Rifles

The main area of operations in which the SPR succeeded in gaining some level of control between 1916 and 1918 was in the provinces of Fars and Kerman and in particular the towns of Kazerun (Fars) and Sirjan (Kerman), the former being the main strategic route to the Gulf town of Bushihr.¹²¹ Throughout 1916 and 1917, the main activities carried out was enforcing law and order, guarding outposts, improving roads and protecting lines of communication between Kerman and the Gulf from thieves. Between June and August 1917 a considerable amount of work was carried out by the SPR in improving road communications in the south. By the end of August the road between Shiraz and Aminibad, some 350 kilometres had been made passable for motor vehicles.¹²²

During those years Kerman Brigade was involved in at least eighteen minor operations. The brunt of the work, especially during 1917, fell on Indian combatants (just over 1,000 in strength).¹²³ A typical operation for example was that recorded on 10 June 1917 when a party of SPR escorting a caravan on the Isfahan road north of Abadeh the capital of Fars province, beat off an attack by a band of Qashqai robbers, suffering one casualty. Two days later a donkey caravan, carrying wheat for Shiraz and escorted by a small detachment of SPR was again attacked and captured by Qashqai robbers not far from Abadeh, two of the SPR were killed and two of the robbers wounded.¹²⁴

Along with these operations they also took on the challenge presented by Persian nationalist inspired by German agents such as Wassmuss. It was around the towns Sirjan and Kazerun that the first two serious politically motivated incidents concerning the SPR took place. The incident at Sirjan between July and September 1916 was sparked off by Persian nationalist anti-British feelings stoked up Wassmuss.¹²⁵

¹²¹ Safiri. "The South Persian Rifles".p.130. See also Safiri, "South Persia Rifles [Http://Www.Iranicaonline.Org/Articles/South-Persia-Rifles-Militia](http://www.Iranicaonline.Org/Articles/South-Persia-Rifles-Militia)".

¹²² Moberly.p.251.

¹²³ Safiri, "South Persia Rifles [Http://Www.Iranicaonline.Org/Articles/South-Persia-Rifles-Militia](http://www.Iranicaonline.Org/Articles/South-Persia-Rifles-Militia)".

¹²⁴ Moberly.p.247. On hearing of this, and travelling over fifty miles in pursuit, Captain Lilly at Abadeh with sixty SPR cavalry caught up with the robbers and after a running fight forced them to abandon a number of laden donkeys and inflicted several casualties on them.

¹²⁵ Safiri. "The South Persian Rifles".Pp.130-131.

However in early 1917, the trouble the SPR were confronted with in Kazerun was, 'of a different category and infinitely more complex in origin and course' when the SPR became embroiled in local inter-tribal differences and squabbling and were used both as a tool and object of attack by opposing tribal camps.¹²⁶

Given the provocative and threatening nature of the British presence under the guise of the SPR, the force became an increasing target for politically motivated attacks throughout the summer of 1918. Growing anti-British and pro-Persian patriotic sentiment fuelled by German success in March on the Western Front had grown throughout the spring of 1918. The fear of the motives of the British by the Qashqai tribes and influence of the SPR added to the anti-British sentiment in Fars.¹²⁷ In May 1918 this sentiment resulted in a rebellion which broke out in Fars when Qashqai tribes declared war on the British.¹²⁸ The rebellion was sparked off by a trivial incident when tribesmen were arrested by the SPR on 10 May for allegedly stealing two donkeys belonging to the Rifles at their outpost of seventy men at Khan-i-Zinan forty-seven kilometres west of Shiraz.¹²⁹ The tribal leader demanded their release which was refused by a Captain Hill and fighting broke out. This was the spark that exploded stored resentment to the British in Fars. It was also a cause for uniting the tribes in the Fars province who gathered a force together of about 3,500 men.¹³⁰

There were other incidents in Fars where SPR outposts were attacked. To quell this uprising and disturbance the SPR at Bushir was reinforced by Indian troops which brought their strength up to 10,000.¹³¹ By the end of the May revolt when the tribes withdrew, casualties to the Qashqai tribesmen were approximately 200 dead, 250 wounded. Casualties to SPR were two officers and fifty Indian ranks killed and wounded.¹³² Later in June and July of 1918, the near-encirclement of the Shiraz garrison and local British residence by tribesmen continued the anti-British sentiments in Fars.¹³³

¹²⁶ Ibid.p.130. See also Safiri, "South Persia Rifles [Http://Www.Iranicaonline.Org/Articles/South-Persia-Rifles-Militia](http://www.Iranicaonline.Org/Articles/South-Persia-Rifles-Militia)". Kazerun provided a vantage point from which the main route running to Bushihr and other minor routes to the shores of the Gulf was held.

¹²⁷ Safiri. "The South Persian Rifles".p.244. Wassmuss became active in the southern tribes throughout this period.

¹²⁸ Safiri, "South Persia Rifles [Http://Www.Iranicaonline.Org/Articles/South-Persia-Rifles-Militia](http://www.Iranicaonline.Org/Articles/South-Persia-Rifles-Militia)". See also Safiri. "The South Persian Rifles".p.134 and p.235.

¹²⁹ Moberly.p.309.See also Safiri. "The South Persian Rifles".p.238.

¹³⁰ Safiri. "The South Persian Rifles".p.238. The SPR managed to put down the nationalist rising in Fars.

¹³¹ Ibid.p.260 Indian troops were mainly from the 124th Baluch Regiment and Burma Mounted Rifles.

¹³² Ibid.p.240.

¹³³ Ibid.p.261.

The Bazar and shops closed, people flocked into the city to partake in the demonstrations. Mullahs condemned the British from pulpits on the streets. The British defused the situation by using their Persian allies to create dissention among local tribal chiefs.¹³⁴

The growth of Persian nationalism and revolt in the south had further consequences for the SPR. Cohesion in the ranks of the force began to break. Their response was ‘disappointing’ to raids carried out by Arab tribesmen along some of the caravan routes the SPR were protecting. Occasionally men for the SPR avoided encounters with raiders or simply fled.¹³⁵ Persian officers of the SPR on detachment duties between Shiraz and Abadeh, made frivolous complaints and gave trouble in a way they had never done before.¹³⁶ However, although the break in cohesion was sporadic among the ranks of the SPR, the Persian officer corps was considered ‘the weak spot’.¹³⁷ In April and May 1918, there were several outbreaks of desertion and mutinies in various villages and outposts. On average, twelve to fifteen men deserted at these outposts. Six men deserted their post on 21 April 1918 and all six were shot without trial resulting in a public outcry which fuelled anti-British / SPR sentiments.¹³⁸ On 25 May 1918, mutiny broke out at Khan-i-Zinan with the death of two British officers.¹³⁹ In July 1918, the Abadeh garrison of the SPR mutinied. The weakening of the garrison left it open to attack from Persian nationalists and Qashqai tribesmen who took particular revenge on the few remaining Persian officers left in the garrison. More desertions followed when nationalists took control of the town, removed Anglophile local government officials, set up their own ruling committee that issued orders and proclamations, levied fines on all those who were suspected of having made a profit out of the SPR, collected taxes and commandeered supplies. The deserters formed their own militia loyal to the new regime calling themselves the Gendarmerie Gouvernmentale and reverted back to Swedish methods of organisation and drill, even using the Swedish trumpet call.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁴ Ibid.p.264. An outbreak of cholera and influenza in the province debilitated nationalist spirits.

¹³⁵ Moberly.p.278. On 18 January, fifty SPR cavalry, encountering some 200 raiders near Saadatabad, broke and fled as soon as one of their number was killed ; their British officer and non-commissioned officer, left in the lurch, being lucky to escape.

¹³⁶ Ibid.p.279.

¹³⁷ Ibid.pp.291-292.

¹³⁸ Safiri. "The South Persian Rifles".p.255.

¹³⁹ Ibid.p.240.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.p.270 The garrison consisted of 14 British officers, two regiments of SPR and three platoons of the 16th Rajputs. Convinced the component of Persian men in the garrison, who were mainly agricultural landless labourers drawn from the surrounding villages, were more in the hands of their Persian officers and had little loyalty to their British officers and had ‘no fighting instincts’, removed most of the arms and ammunition from

By the end of 1918, the SPR had turned into a farce. Their commanding officers Sir Percy Sykes left Persia in October 1918.

The road to disbandment

At the end of the war, the fate of the SPR was open to three paths. Reduction in size; hand to the Persian government to form a unit in the new Persian army or disbandment.¹⁴¹ In terms of handing over the SPR to the Persians, there were mixed opinions in between London and Marling who wanted to hand over the SPR to the Persian government. Lord Curzon's Persia Committee in London objected believing it was neither practicable nor desirable.¹⁴² Marling, who was replaced in September 1918 by Sir Percy Cox as the British minister in Tehran, raised the issue of costs to bolster his argument to hand over the SPR to the Persians. In mid-December 1918, the running cost to the British of keeping a military presence in Persia had amounted to more than 2.2 million pounds per month.¹⁴³ The collapse of Russia following the Bolshevik revolution of October 1917 and withdrawal of its forces in northern Persia left a large part of the country under British occupation.¹⁴⁴ To fill this security vacuum, Britain raised other forces similar to the SPR to protect and defend her interests. These forces were for example the Dunsterforce; the East Persia Cordon; the Indian Expeditionary Force backed by the SPR, the Bushire Expeditionary Force and the North Persia Force (Norperforce). It cost money to keep these forces in the field. For example, Norperforce cost 1.5 million pounds per month, the East Cordon cost 140,000 pounds per month, the Bushire Expeditionary Force and the SPR cost 290,000 pounds per month each.¹⁴⁵ The cost of running these forces was considerably more than the value of trade in south Persia. According to Marling, 'To my mind Persia is no longer a possible factor in the war, and therefore we should not waste money and efforts there'.¹⁴⁶ Churchill agreed with Marling's argument by noting. 'Fancy spending the whole cost of a British Territorial Army on a weak and futile interference in the affairs of Persia'.¹⁴⁷

them and gave them to the Indian contingent in the garrison. This action led to desertion of both Persian officers and men.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.p.281.

¹⁴² Olson.p.187.

¹⁴³ Sabahi.p.41.

¹⁴⁴ Olson.p.185. The Cossack Brigade collapsed and Russian troops took to looting and brigandage.

¹⁴⁵ Sabahi.p.41. Note according to Olson, 'Britain was spending over 100,000 pounds per week' on the SPR. See Olson.p.186.

¹⁴⁶ Olson.p.186.

¹⁴⁷ Sabahi.p.44.

Talks began between the Persians and British on the hand over option. Under the leadership of Vasug ud-Daula, the Persian government wanted Britain to recognise Persian independence, press with the Russians to abrogate the 1907 Convention and take control of the SPR.¹⁴⁸ The British did not want to lose the influence they had developed in Persia via the presence of the SPR. Lose them and they would lose influence in Persia and protection of their oil investments.¹⁴⁹ As a compromise with the British, Vasug ud-Daula as an interim suggested the SPR could have neutral officers from either Switzerland (Roman Swiss) or Norway, not Sweden.¹⁵⁰

However, the success in Palestine in September 1918 strengthened the British hand over the officering of the SPR. The need for compromise lessened. The British Foreign Office official Eyre Crow noted in a minute that, 'we are the top dogs'.¹⁵¹ The guiding principle of post-war British policy in Persia was to have and maintain a permanent influence in Persia and any agreement with the Persians on the existence SPR was not now necessary.¹⁵² Britain was attracted by the new post-war possibilities in Persia and was determined to guard it.¹⁵³

By August 1918, Persia was in absolute chaos and in danger of disintegration. Political stability, law and order, a re-organisation of the country's financial system and a unified military force was desperately needed.¹⁵⁴ Sir Percy Cox saw Persia's weakness as Britain's opportunity to consolidate and strengthen her position in southern Persia. With the carrot of financial assistance, negotiations between Curzon and the apparently pliable Persian leader Vusuq ud-Daula resulted in the Anglo-Persian Agreement signed in Tehran on 9 August 1919. While re-affirming Persian independence, the agreement envisaged the appointment of a British advisor for the Iranian treasury, and a military advisor / committee to set up a new Persian army by absorbing the Cossack Division, the Gendarmerie and other small units, both positions paid for by the Persians.

¹⁴⁸ Olson.p.209.

¹⁴⁹ Safiri. "The South Persian Rifles".p.282. In 1912, the daily output from Persia's oilfields was 1,600 barrels; by 1918 it was 18,000 barrels per day. Strachan.p.780.

¹⁵⁰ Olson.p.207.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.p.211.

¹⁵² Ibid.p.212

¹⁵³ Ibid.p.213.

¹⁵⁴ Katouzian, Homa. "The Campaign against the Anglo-Iranian Agreement of 1919," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 25, no. 1 (1998).p.6.

The project was to be financed by a British loan of 2,000,000 pounds for 20 years at 7% annual interest.¹⁵⁵ The agreement secured the existence of the SPR. In order to get the agreement, negotiations of which were carried out in secret, the British paid 131,000 pounds to Vausq and two of his colleagues later known as the Triumvirate.¹⁵⁶ The agreement failed for several reasons. The British Treasury, the War Office, the India Office and government of India regarded the agreement as costly and offensive to surging Persian nationalism. There were envious international objections from France, America and Bolshevik Russia. The war had let the genie of Persian nationalism and revolution out of the bottle and it was this genie that ultimately collapsed the agreement.¹⁵⁷

By late February 1921, the administration of a new Prime Minister Sepahdar in Tehran had been ousted in a military coup whose leaders formed an alliance with Bolshevik Russia. Within weeks, the new regime began to reorganise the country's armed forces to restore internal order.¹⁵⁸ Reza Khan, the Cossack Brigade officer who led the coup had his own plans for the formation of a modern Persian army which did not include the SPR.¹⁵⁹ Despite the objections from the British Admiralty and Anglo – Persian Oil Company directors who were prepared to bankroll the SPR, the Treasury and India Offices ceased funding the SPR and orders for disbandment were issued in Shiraz in July 1921. By 16 December 1921, the SPR were disbanded.¹⁶⁰

Their departure was bitter. The Persians were refused the offer to buy the SPR equipment, armoury and stores, most of which was sent to India. Their medical equipment was given to the American Christian Missionaries.¹⁶¹ British officers left Bashir for India. Other ranks went either to Mesopotamia to re-enlist into the British Army; some joined the Persian Army and others simply went home. Their barracks were handed over to the Persian Army.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁵ Sabahi.p.18 and p.45.

¹⁵⁶ Katouzian. "The Campaign against the Anglo-Iranian Agreement of 1919."p.7.

¹⁵⁷ Olson.p.249.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.p.248. The coup was headed by a newspaper editor / politician Sayyid Zia ad-Din Tabataba i and an officer in the Cossack Brigade, Reza Khan who led some 2,000 Cossacks in a march on Tehran which had been masterminded by Sayyid Zia who was later deposed and replaced by Sepahdar. See Sabahi.p.56.

¹⁵⁹ Sabahi.p.58.

¹⁶⁰ Safiri. "The South Persian Rifles".p.296. See also Sabahi.p.58.

¹⁶¹ Safiri. "The South Persian Rifles".p.298

¹⁶² Ibid.p.296.

Persian men who fought against the SPR and British that were 'killed by the enemies of Persia' were commemorated as martyrs. Those who fought with SPR were treated harshly.

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In conclusion

Being a brainchild of the British Foreign Office, in co-operation with other British military forces, the SPR managed to stem the German challenge and keep southern Persia relatively quiet. German efforts to take the war to Britain in Persia and indeed Afghanistan had mixed results. By imposing a limited degree of military control, the SPR secured British commercial and strategic interests in Fars and Kerman provinces. For the benefits of Persia, it safeguarded trade routes, built roads, and reduced the strength of law-breaking bandit thus giving a security to the settled population. It was also a source of employment for sections of the Persian population.¹⁶⁴ However, by interfering in the complexities of tribal and political rivalries for their own gains through extortion and bribery, the SPR contributed to the internal political strife of the country which ultimately led to their exit.¹⁶⁵ They became a symbol of an unwelcomed British presence in Persia. The British Government, protecting her own imperial interests in Persia meddled their way into southern Persia in 1916 through the agency of the South Persia Rifles and muddled their way out of it in 1921.¹⁶⁶ By that time however, a certain Dublin Fusilier and SPR man named Thomas Sherwood was back in Ireland playing golf at his club in Bray, Co. Wicklow.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶³ Ibid.p.300.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.p.304. See also p.306.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.p.306. The British let the Persian nationalist genie out of the bottle. Olson.p.249.

¹⁶⁶ Safiri. "The South Persian Rifles".p.301 and p.304.

¹⁶⁷ "Sherwood,2nd Lieut,Thomas Barlow 7th Royal Dublin Fusiliers and South Persia Rifles." Thomas Sherwood served in various desert outposts with the SPR such as Saidabad (Sirjan) guarding caravan routes from Kerman and Shiraz to Bandar Abbas on the Persian Gulf. He played golf in Bray Golf Club. On 19 February 1966, Tom Sherwood died at the age of eighty-five.

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