

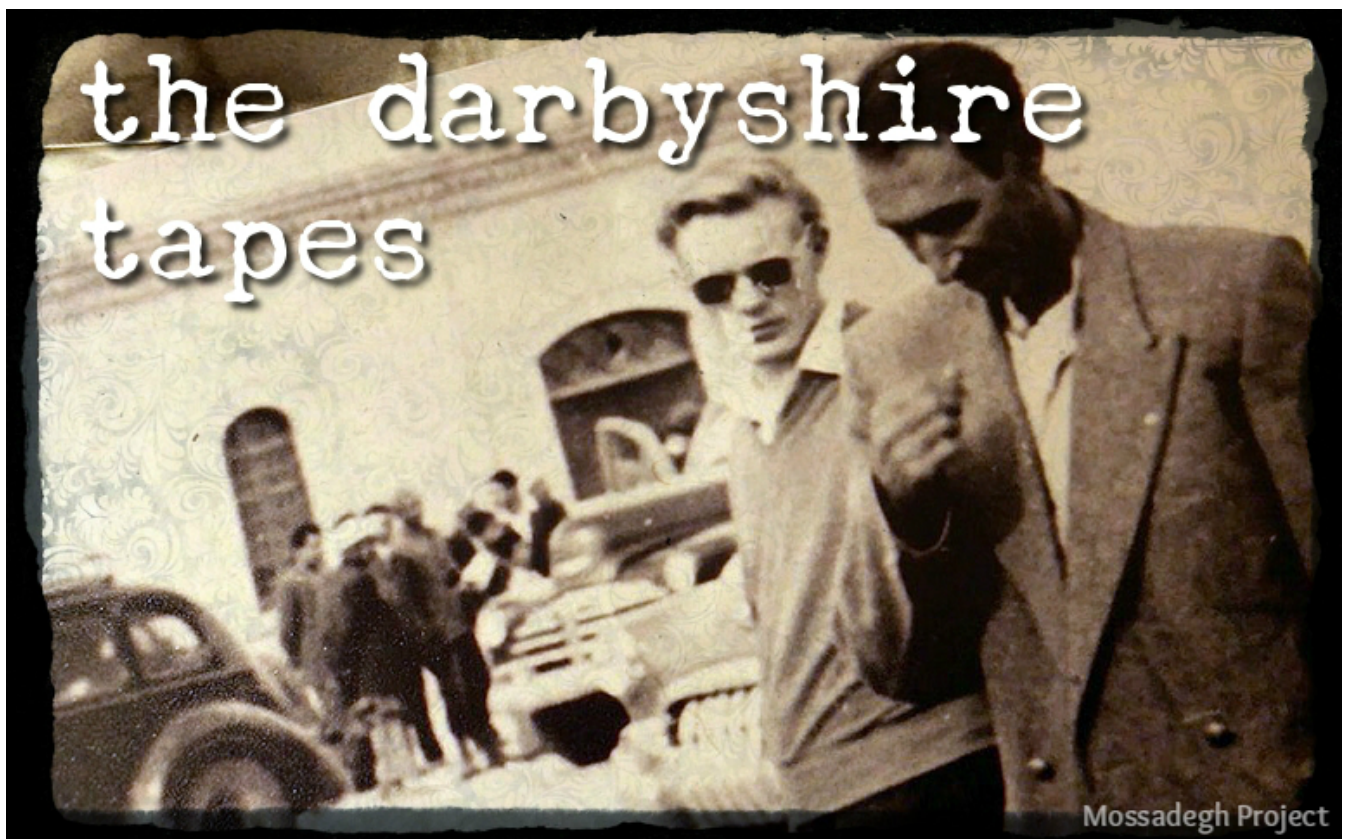
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The Darbyshire Tapes: **Norman Darbyshire on Iran** *British Spy's Major Role in 1953 Coup Revealed in Explosive, Uncensored Interview (Transcript)*

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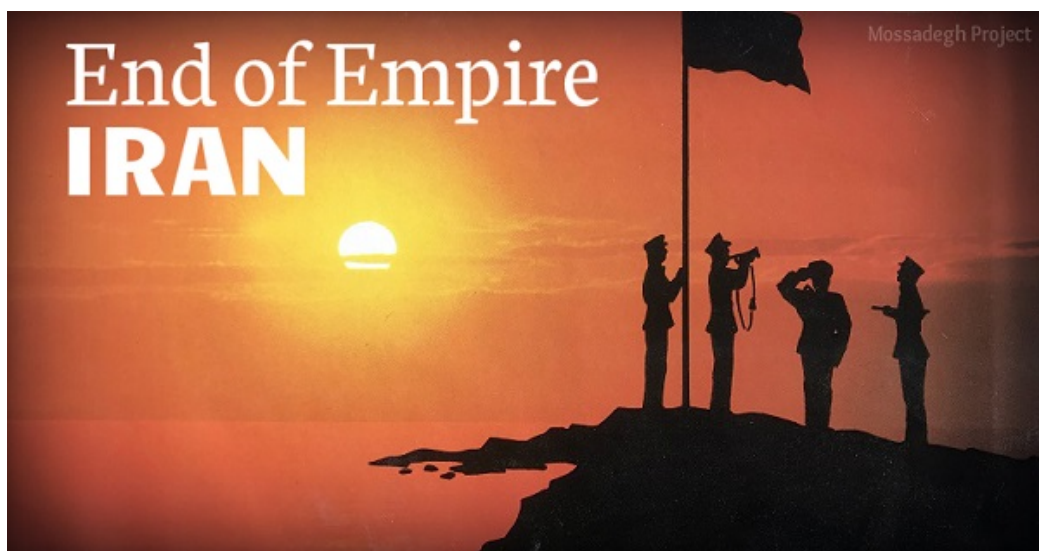
[Updated November 5, 2020]



The trouble with being a spy is the lack of recognition. MI6 agent Norman Darbyshire (1924-1993), a key figure in the 1953 coup in Iran, is getting his now, over 3½ decades later.

A transcript of Darbyshire's 1983 interview for the Iran episode of the British TV series *End of Empire* (1985) has recently been unearthed, adding new details about the British role in the coup. And the fact that it was not included in the actual program, apparently by design, does give it a certain *licentiousness* (the producers say it was off the record and not filmed). His CIA partner-in-crime, Stephen Meade, *was* interviewed on camera, but perhaps not coincidentally, all his footage went unused.

At any rate, no Darbyshire footage, if it ever existed, has yet turned up, nor has the audio which most certainly did. All that remains of the Q&A is a rough transcript, teeming with spelling and grammatical errors, which until now was hidden away from public view.



End of Empire: Iran | Granada Television | ITV

It all unfolded unexpectedly. When an intrepid Iranian-British filmmaker, Taghi Amirani, was interviewing Mossadegh's grandson, Hedayat Matine-Daftary, for his feature length documentary *Coup 53*, he came upon a treasure trove. As an adviser on the *End of Empire* episode, Matine-Daftary possessed a big stack of papers and show notes from the program in his Paris basement, which he freely offered for their use. A transcript of Darbyshire's bombshell interview lay among them.

The problem was that there were big pieces cut out — not for concealment, but merely their method of selecting the dialogue they

wanted to use on television, presumably to be pasted into a working assembly. But then Amirani obtained another copy of the transcript. This one was complete, except Darbyshire's name was blanked out.

Since the question of whether Darbyshire ever appeared on camera is now contested (members of the production team seemed to have foggy, contradicting memories in the film, but have since stated adamantly that he was *not* filmed), the transcript, flawed as it may be, is the most complete surviving record of Darbyshire's frank confessional.

It isn't the first time any of this content got out there, however. Without identifying Darbyshire, Nigel Hawkes' May 1985 write-up on *End of Empire* in London's *The Observer* used many of the choice quotes that just ran in media articles worldwide (though he can't seem to recall how he got hold of them). And writer Stephen Dorril included some of Darbyshire's interview in his book *MI6: Fifty Years of Special Operations* (2000), though he did not disclose his source. Both men, who also divulged, as long as 20-25 years ago, Darbyshire's admitted involvement in the kidnapping (but not murder) of Brig. Gen. Afshartous, turn up in *Coup 53*, but resolve little.

Dorril also altered one of the quotes pertaining to Ashraf Pahlavi, saying that her "eyes lit up" when Darbyshire flashed wads of cash her way. Actually Darbyshire's phrasing in the transcript was that "her eyes alighted". Stephen Kinzer repeated this misquote, citing Dorril, in his celebrated book *All the Shah's Men* (2003). Finally, actor Ralph Fiennes, as Darbyshire, performed many of the juicier lines in his scenes for *Coup 53*.

End of Empire executive producer Brian Lapping, who also wrote the 1985 companion book on the series, clearly incorporated information from Darbyshire in his Iran chapter, and even referred to him (incognito) as "the MI6 man" responsible for getting the £1.5 million to the Rashidians.

Prof. Fakhreddin Azimi referenced his April 1984 interview with Darbyshire in the book *Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953 Coup in Iran* (2004). Darbyshire told him Afshartous' death was not part of the plan, and actually implicated Ardeshir Zahedi in the murder plot.



COUP 53: Timely and Powerful Documentary Delivers (Film Review)

So while the release of the transcript that made headlines this week isn't *entirely new*, it's still rather game-changing, with loads of information — and misinformation — to keep historians busy for a while. Yet its numerous inaccuracies should also serve as a reminder not to necessarily take anything Darbyshire said at face value.

Amirani has turned over the complete 1983 interview conducted by Alison Rooper to the National Security Archive, a project of George Washington University, who **published** them online this week, but they're somewhat difficult to read as they are.

In view of the their ragged presentation, I've produced a completely new transcript of the Darbyshire tapes intended to be much more coherent and reader-friendly, taking no particular liberties except mainly to clean up the copy, fix the atrocious spelling, and add paragraph breaks. Along with my informational annotations, the result is a total renovation.

This new transcript is mostly self explanatory, but note that the sections the producers had scissored out because they wanted to use them in the

TV program are highlighted. And when you see *[redacted]*, those are words that got whited out for some reason. PDF files of the originals are attached below.

You can also watch the complete *End of Empire: Iran* program, sans Darbyshire, [here](#).



• NOTE: (Nov. 5, 2020) This article has been slightly revised to incorporate recent public statements from the *End of Empire* team regarding the manner in which Darybyshire was interviewed. They dispute aspects of how they were depicted in *Coup 53*, objecting in particular to the insinuation that the British government intervened to make them censor the interview, which they categorically deny. They are asking for this to be corrected in the documentary, which has been temporarily pulled from distribution due to the dispute. For more info see the addendums at the end of the page.

Norman Darbyshire Interview for End Of Empire

Transcript by Arash Norouzi. © The Mossadegh Project

Norman Darbyshire tape 1

[Darbyshire gives background on his adventures in the Middle East,

beginning with Iran]

I was there from the end of '43 to the middle of '47 and from late '49 to '52 when Mossadegh threw us out and **broke off relations** and I was there again from '63 to '67. During Mossadegh's time in power they passed a statute which banned anyone with previous experience in Iran who spoke Persian from being posted back again to the country...well you'd have thought that having put the Shah back again on his throne it would have been the easiest thing in the world to have said just cancel it, but it was the Swiss ambassador in Tehran who, in his excessive zeal, pointed out to the Foreign Office that this law was still on the statute book and that several members of Denis Wright's party who were going back as the initial reestablishment of the embassy, had served in Iran and did speak Persian. *[Wright was Charge d'Affaires in Iran after the coup]*

John Fearnley was allowed to go back because he didn't speak Persian; Norman Hillier-Fry and I were going back with the first batch and they had to allow someone back and so **Denis** went in cold without a Persian speaker on his team — but that was the Foreign Office being wishy-washy beyond belief. It should have been a simple matter from the Foreign Secretary to the Foreign Minister for Iran. In fact I was booked on the plane and this thing came through about six hours before. I went out in [the] '45-47 period first of all as an army officer in SOE. *[Special Operations Executive]*

Colonel Maclean *[N.L.D. 'Billy' Maclean]* and I were the first to have gone into Azerbaijan after the Russians had withdrawn, he had been up in Kashgar before the Chinese overran it and he was on his way back home, precisely what he was doing there except stripping gold off his gold belt and marrying one of the local Kashgars every week or so, I don't know, but he finally got out and came to Hong Kong and then via India and he knew Wayborn quite well and he stayed with one of Waverill's ADC's *[aide-de-camp, an assistant to a high-ranking officer]* called Charles Rankin and he persuaded the DMI *[Directorate of*

Military Intelligence] in India to finance his return by road — India, Afghanistan, Persia, Turkey and that way — it had to be at a certain time which was winter. He had various exciting episodes on the way — breaking down in Afghanistan. Charles Rankin was then being recalled to the bar and he had to be back by a certain date and I met up with them in Mashad in eastern Iran where I had gone off for the weekend to take a diplomatic bag because there was no reliable postal service — and he said “Well why don’t you join me” — I said I would have to find out if the Ambassador would let me go — he said “Fine I’ll come down to Tehran”. His car kept breaking down, eventually we got it all repaired and finally set off. I was given weeks in which to do this and off we set and we went to the Caspian and chuntered all the way up to the coast and Russian border and we got that damn car to within about 200 yards of the pass and we couldn’t because of the snow. So we had to turn around and come all the way back — this was ten days after we had left and it went on like that. We had been assured by the Turkish military attaché in Tehran that if we could go to Tabriz and then go over the Turkish border that even if we got stuck we could put the car on the train and go to Ankara.

We finally got to Tabriz and struggled to the border in terrible snow conditions and on the border which is a no man’s land, the Persian post is on one side and then there is a mile of no man’s land which you cross before you come to the Turkish post. We left Iran and our passports were stamped accordingly and we got to the Turkish post with 6 feet of snow on the road which would never be moved until the spring. So then, back we had to go but then the Persians wouldn’t let us in again because we didn’t have an entry visa. We were arrested and taken down to the governor — and the governor wrote in my passport that he personally authorized us to enter Iran even though we did not have a visa and this is because of snow on the road.

We came back to Tabriz. We drove to Mahabad and decided to try and go down the Rondu Gorge which links that part of Persian Kurdistan with northern Iraq and then get up into Turkey that way, well the

Persians were always very suspicious people, particularly the military — we were staying in Mahabad with the commanding officer of the Persian troops, he asked what we were proposing to do and we explained... “Now that is surprising”, he said, “I don’t suppose that by any chance you realize we and the Iraqis are going to have for the first time a joint offensive one from the Iraqi side and one from the Persian side to squeeze Mustafan and Basani out?” He told us that the gorge was controlled by the Basanis. He said that he did have a liaison officer in touch with the Basanis, I would let him take you down the gorge but only about 20 kilometers, and when we got down the gorge we ran slap into the main Basani party...asking us what we were doing and they said they would take us down and sure enough 10 kilometers on 6 feet of snow again so we had to come back all the way to Tabriz and all the way back to Ghazvin.

Was the purpose of the journey to get to England for you?

No, but Maclean was. At that stage I was not officially in Intelligence.

(At this point Darbyshire is explained the focus of the program and the dates and events)

You realize that when **Razmara was assassinated** he was attending a memorial service of another cabinet colleague of his who had also been assassinated...and at the time he had in his pocket the first 50-50 agreement and he was waiting to choose the moment to present it. That would have changed our whole dealings in the Middle East.

[Premier Ali Razmara was at the mosque on March 7, 1951 to memorialize Ayatollah Faiz. Most sources don’t indicate he was assassinated. While there, Razmara was shot down by a radical Islamist, Khalil Tahmasebbi.]

At that stage I was in the embassy in Tehran: I was vice-consul in Mashad when Razmara was assassinated — the Shah could have

nominated anyone according to the constitution but instead let it be known that he'd take the feelings of the Majles and that brought **Mossadegh** about. I would have thought that he would have almost certainly have chosen someone else...

*[Parliament voted for Mossadegh 79-12, after which the Shah **begrudgingly** approved. Mossadegh, who had been arrested and jailed by his father, Reza Shah, in 1940, was not his preference.]*

Why did we no longer have an influence over the Shah's choice? *[Mohammad Reza Pahlavi]*

Don't forget that it was not only ourselves — it was the Russians as well and immediately after *[redacted]* the Americans were very new to the game and certainly we would have hoped to have had more influence. The **Shah** was a very young man when he was put on the throne and he was knocked around from pillar to post between Britain and Russia and he was always listening to the last person in and that was often the advice he took.

Were you seeing him in that period of early 1950-51?

YES but more on a social basis because I was young...we were in touch with him — and I particularly was in touch with the Persians who were influential with him — Ernest Perron, people like that terrible man — *[The Shah's Swiss courtier, a friend and confidante since childhood]*

Could the Shah *[redacted]* no longer ignore opinion in the Majlis?

He didn't know what to do. He thought he'd take the easy way out and ask them to give him an expression of their will about *[redacted]* because they couldn't agree on anybody else. It then became clear that Mossadegh was an ardent nationalist *[redacted]* and xenophobic to boot — one of the things that he did of course was to close all the consulates

in Eastern and Northern Iran — ones that remained open were the consulate general in Ahvaz-Khorramshahr from Abadan. He also nationalized the Soviet-Persian fisheries. We thought when Mossadegh came in that it would be relatively easy to get him removed — constitutionally yes — because the Shah had the right to do it if he wished. But now you get another character entering the scene: the late professor Robin Zaehner. *[Academic and MI6 agent]* (I haven't got a copy of Monty's book with me) — *[MI6 agent C. Montgomery Woodhouse, who wrote "Something Ventured" in 1982]*

Anthony Eden sent *[redacted]* out Robin Zaehner...

[The above portion in the cut version had Eden's name crossed out and Morrison scribbled above it, also below — "Morrison?" First Eden and then Herbert Morrison had been Foreign Secretary, hence the confusion. The uncut version names Eden only.]

(The relevant pages of the book are talked about...)



I had shared a house with Zaehner in Tehran for 3½ years, between '43 and '47. His brief was very simple: go out, don't inform the Ambassador, use the intelligence services to provide you with any money you might need and secure the overthrow of Mossadegh by legal or quasi-legal means...the Ambassador was Shepherd. *[Francis Shepherd]* It was the decision of the Foreign Secretary without consulting his permanent officials. Strang wouldn't have known. *[William Strang, Permanent Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs]* This is where we would have come on, not to mention the Rashidian brothers all of whom are now dead.

Were you under Zaehner's orders?

I was responsible to Monty. *[Monty Woodhouse]* When Mossadegh

broke off relations and we all left and drove across to Iraq and then eventually to Beirut and Monty took on another post in London and I took over from him running the Persian station in exile from Cyprus.

You presumably had a lot of contacts and friends in Persia and amongst them were the Rashidian brothers...how quickly did Zaehner start marshalling...

He did it very quickly. To begin with we were not officially aware of what he was trying to do except that having lived with the man for 3½ years and acting as his paymaster vast sums of money were being spent, and we were doing it our way and getting him the actual cash — he used to carry biscuit tins with damn great notes. And he spent a lot but did not succeed in '51.

This was going on behind the scenes all the time that Stokes and Harriman were out there? [*Lord Privy Seal Richard Stokes and U.S. envoy Averell Harriman*]

Yes. I think he spent well over a million and a half pounds. The coup cost £700,000. I know because I spent it. The money was going via the Rashidian brothers to people to keep them sweet and see what they could do. The way you use money in Persian Majlis is that you buy a vote and once the vote has come up, if you are paid enough that's fair enough. The other way of course, is that if you are a possible candidate for the *[redacted]* premiership then you obviously have your own, what they call, faction — group — and if you are looking a likely candidate, then you could start negotiating with whoever's vote you might want to get and so it is a combination of legal Persian practices and quasi-legal which is straightforward bribery.

Shepherd tried and failed to get the Shah to sign the document.

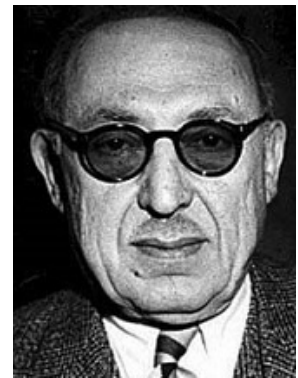
Meanwhile as we move toward the break in relations then

they started thinking in terms of a possible coup...

In terms of 1951, the Shah wouldn't sack Mossadegh but it wasn't until '52 that there was an attempt with Ghavam...

[The Shah did not ax Mossadegh in July 1952, he resigned due to a dispute over the control of the armed forces, and Ahmad Ghavam was selected to replace him. Ghavam resigned after only four days in office due to public protest, and Mossadegh returned as Premier with the expanded powers he sought.]

That flew off the handle. Didn't work at all. Never a starter. Julian Amery failed miserably. *[Conservative Member of Parliament who tried to help Ghavam]* We had underestimated the Mossadegh position and so had the Shah. Probably not enough was spent or could be to buy off the people...you have to weigh money in the hand against a promise by Mossadegh of positions of authority which would lead eventually to a lot more money. Also, remember Mossadegh had in his government a member of the **Tudeh party**, and the Russians were hoping to keep Mossadegh in power....this was a potential problem I had to keep an eye on. The Tudeh party had been proscribed *[banned]* after the attempt on the Shah's life in 1949 and it was still proscribed that Mossadegh should introduce a member of the Tudeh, communist party into his cabinet. (I'd have have to look his name up.)



[There were absolutely no Communists in Mossadegh's government and Iran received no support from the USSR. As Darbyshire noted, the Tudeh party was banned. HOWEVER, DURING GHAVAM'S PREMIERSHIP IN THE MID 1940's, THERE WERE THREE (3) COMMUNISTS IN HIS GOVERNMENT. The U.S. and UK wanted Ghavam to replace Mossadegh in 1952.]

What was the name of the civil servant that you used; there

was a man who used to attend Cabinet meetings because his minister had resigned or was not there in about '52, '53?

(He doesn't remember. It is agreed that they will draw up a list of points for him to think about)

Division of labor. What was your specific job in '51, '52?

Telling Sam what to say to the Rashidians and keeping informed in general terms on the political situation, not only on the Rashidians but dozens of others. *[British diplomat Sam Falle]* And working with Zaehner on what needed to be done.

When it looked very much as if Mossadegh was bound to break relations, we started talking with the Rashidians about the possibility of mounting a coup, probably immediately after we had departed. Sam and I at that stage drafted an outline plan for implementation say for about ten days after we had left. This convoy left Tehran and eventually ended up in Beirut, Sam and I left it in Baghdad and flew on to Beirut with our plan in our pockets and there we had a first meeting with the Americans inviting their cooperation but after much discussion that was turned down. That meeting was totally inconsequential.

The plan would have involved seizure of key points in the city by what units we thought were loyal to the Shah and possibly anti-Mossadegh, seizure of the radio station etc...the classical plan. By this time though people weren't quite aware of the depth of organization the Rashidians had and they thought it was far too great a risk to take and that if it backfired (both the Americans and the Foreign Office)...we talked to the CIA with Foreign Office knowledge but they had cold feet very much more than we had to begin with because it was quite clear that they didn't have anything near like what we had on the ground and so we went on to Cyprus, we had issued the Rashidians with radio sets...two of them were arrested at one stage, the third one jumped over the back wall and he was the one who stayed at large right to the end. His first

name was Saifollah: he is the one who had a house over here but in fact they maintained the family suite at Grosvenor House practically until they died.



They were an extraordinary bunch of brothers because none of them really spoke English except Saifollah did a bit towards the end but after all this was over in that if they had dealings with the West, (he did speak some English) and therefore was the relations man, his older brother who was a merchant and a commercially minded chap — he owned and ran cinemas and bought films — his name was

Ghodratollah and the third was Assadollah — he was the political end of the trio — it was he who knew and dealt with the Shah. They were late 30's or early 40's. They were fascinated by the idea of politics altogether and intrigued by being in contact with the British and delighted to take our money for something which they believed in themselves. They felt Mossadegh was very much a threat (and their father had been earlier on in the century had been a well known respected figure and took refuge in the embassy). They had always been brought up by the old man believing the British were very good...they also believed in English education all of their children went off to school in England, the girls in the Isle of Wight —

tape ends

Norman Darbyshire tape 2

This is one of the other sons?

No this was the sister's son. He eventually became a qualified pilot and a senior captain in Iran Air, but he did all his training here. The Rashidian brothers saw in Mossadegh a direct threat to Iran, they wanted Iran

totally independent of Russia and they said give him two years and you will have a Tudeh government in Iran. I really do believe it because Mossadegh was a fairly weak character after all; he had no real understanding of international politics and once you get highly trained members of the communist party in it doesn't take long...we didn't share the American view that he was acting as a bulwark against communism...we thought he would be pushed over by the communists in the long run and I think that I am right in saying that we had a little more experience in Iran than they had. I don't think that we saw things really in the proper light because we didn't realize even then the importance that oil was going to play — the major role in the Middle East during the 50's, 60's and 70's.

[Darbyshire on the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company's failure to anticipate the rising tide of disgruntled nationalism in Iran]

Let me take you back a little because it may be of interest to talk about nationalization. As early as 1947 I and Basil Bunting moved a great deal in Persian circles in a way that other members of the Embassy didn't: what is said politely in English at a cocktail party to an Ambassador is very different from what emerges with a group of young people.

[Journalist/poet Basil Bunting of AIOC and The Times, later expelled from Iran. The original transcript said "Basil Bumley"]

It was clear that there was considerable feeling against the **AIOC** — we mounted what you might call a clandestine Gallup poll: we wrote it, we framed the questions. It showed us that the Persians thought they had a raw deal; they were bitterly resentful of the way they were being treated by the AIOC because as you probably know, the AIOC were to many expatriates who called anyone west of Calais a wog and to them Iranians were wogs. *[racist slang for non-white people]* The fact that they had just as qualified engineers and chemists as the AIOC was irrelevant: the Persians were not allowed to be members of the 'Club' — which of course was the British club — you didn't mix: Brits and Persians kept separate and they were treated as inferior citizens and of course they

had the feeling that they were being screwed the whole time and quite rightly too and from about 1920 onwards.

We showed this to London and the Ambassador, John Le Rougetel, and he took one look and said, 'Oil, oil, dear boy, that's for the commercial department...' and he refused to read any further and so that is roughly the reception it got when it was in London, 'What are you muttering about oil?' Of course they were totally wrong as it proved four years later. This is the sort of thing that you won't find in any book, I don't think BP would admit that now. *[British Petroleum, formerly AIOC]* Julian Amery wasn't aware of that Gallup poll but he felt it was coming. *[original transcript said "Peter Amery"]*

Was the oil company aware of what you and Zaehner were doing?

No. Immediately after the war, although there were intelligence, that is army officers in Iran, they made it clear through the embassy in Tehran that they regarded themselves as the experts on the oil producing areas and they were perfectly able to look after their own security etc., and therefore SIS *[Secret Intelligence Service]* were never allowed to operate on the oil company areas until it became very obvious that something was going to happen in Abadan and it was nationalization and the problem arose were we or were we not going to take Abadan. It was when Mossadegh said he was going to nationalize Persian oil...and the AIOC turned desperately to us and asked for intelligence and what the intentions of the Persians are.

And again, it was virtually a hopeless task, but it was I who was sent [to] Khorramshahr trying to build up in 5 weeks what we had been trying to build up and been denied for 7 years. This was a straightforward intelligence operation: my purpose was to find out what the Persians intended to do and what strength they were on the ground. I had an introduction to the then commander-in-chief of the Persian forces on the ground in Abadan and I called on him officially as the new vice

consul. I put it to him that I really didn't want to see a bloodbath in Abadan, it would be better to know what we should avoid etc. in terms of the forces at his disposal and how he dispersed them etc. and he fell for it, and oddly enough he was a distant relative of Dr. Mossadegh's: he told me exactly where his troops were and what their communications were and by that time we had the cruiser and warships out there and of course she had her guns open range across the refinery. *[Gen. Mohammad Daftari, a nephew of Mossadegh who aided the Aug. 1953 coup]*

[pencilled in the margin: "Story of getting Persian army details"]

The tanks were there in the day but they were never there at night: between dusk and dawn they parked in a straight line hub to hub...I was on board the Urius every day and everything that he was telling me was checking out from our cracking of the Persian code and why we didn't go in to me will always remain a mystery. That was the five weeks that I had because it was then or never. The commander wanted to avoid shedding Persian blood just as we wanted to avoid shedding British blood. That cost His Majesty's Government the princely sum of 2 lbs. of Lipton tea because he couldn't get it in Persia and I got it for him and that is precisely what I paid him.

[pencilled in the margin (inexact due to illegibility): "This is very mumbled please check thru tape"]

Eric Drake who was then general manager in Abadan, he is on record as saying to the cabinet virtually what you said — you can walk in there and why don't you. Must have been a political decision. *[Drake of AIOC and his wife were also interviewed]*

Of course. Zaehner had left by then. I think he left in September. He left because it hadn't worked and the negotiations had broken down, the Americans had got out, Harriman had left, the refinery had closed

down.

What was the next stage? Did you stay down in Khorramshahr? It can't have been September, it must have been June. No September '51.

I was due to come on leave that summer. After the Khorramshahr episode I came on leave but even then I was very uneasy about the situation and I took the precaution of getting a return visa before I left. I was in the South of France and a week before returning to Tehran, [got a] call from London. The Foreign Office had invited a group of Persian journalists to visit England officially and a great program drawn up by Central Office of Information, for touring, mining, industry, new towns, usual razzle dazzle. But they had forgotten that not a single one spoke English and they had nobody available. I spent a month with them. The idea was that they should return to Tehran and write up Britain in their tin-pot newspapers. On the final day of their tour, we had a farewell lunch and at 5 o'clock that day Mossadegh broke off relations with Great Britain. This was '52.

Did you notice a difference in operational questions when the Tory government came in. Did Eden make its presence felt?

Zaehner had gone. They authorized us to go on financing the Rashidian brothers (this is after the break of relations when we were out) and to maintain contact by wireless. They reported to us and told how they were building up strength in their organization. The mechanics were interesting. I would occasionally have to arrange a check payable to so and so in Zurich, [or] New York and that meant he could have 50,000 or whatever for the arms and people were only too glad to get their money out.

(brief discussion about Ghavam incident, Eden's trust in Julian Amery...didn't work)

When did you first start wooing General Zahedi?



A coup is necessarily predicated on the use of armed force. It had to be somebody who was loyal to the Shah who commanded a certain respect amongst his fellow officers...the army was a bit of joke and all they had done was virtually tribal skirmishes but they had never fought a battle. Zahedi was suitable as a candidate because he had good standing in the army [and] we knew the Shah trusted him...

*[The Shah neither liked nor trusted Zahedi, and **pushed him out** in 1955, replacing him with his Minister of Court, Hossein Ala.]*

In the autumn of '52 after you had gone to Beirut, the Americans weren't keen to take part. Could we not have launched that coup by ourselves?

It wasn't considered because the organization wasn't strong enough with no one there to direct — well Persians are difficult to control — I think it was probably SIS's decision not to recommend it to the Foreign Secretary. *[Eden]* Unfortunately the head of SIS at the time, General Sinclair knew about as much of the Middle East as a 10 year old (far more interested in cricket anyway). *[John Alexander Sinclair]*

Henderson only knew that we wanted to get rid of Mossadegh but he didn't know what means we were going to use, what people etc. *[Loy Henderson, U.S. Ambassador to Iran and a key player in the coup]*

Mossadegh's breaking off of relations — suspect conspiracy? Arrested Rashidians and would have arrested Zahedi...

He avoided arrest and I was involved in protecting him as he moved from house to house in Tehran. *(story then about American cars and Rashidians then in jail when telegram arrived for their car and was*

sent back saying they were in jail but would pick it up in 2½ months).

I knew that it was easy for me to get into to Tehran because I could fly in on American military aircraft, even hide my hair — my hair was very blond and I couldn't do anything except color it. Once in I knew it would be no problem. I thought I ought to be on the spot because they would obviously do things at my behest. in the intelligence world you play your cards pretty close to the chest (we handled the money, we didn't let the CIA touch it) and even if you have an ally, you always go to lengths to protect your own sources of information. We, on instruction, were more forthcoming than CIA were with us. But on the other hand knowing the thing well, could read between the lines and could see who the CIA were using. My request to go in, under American transport, was turned down. So we had to go on keeping in touch by wireless.

Politicians don't like being embarrassed and it would have been embarrassing if anything had gone wrong. I was in charge and London had decided it was me not Monty — because I spoke Farsi and knew the brothers and had been there so long etc. Monty was head of station in Tehran until the break and then he was given another appointment in London, I became his replacement in exile. The actual running of the coup from our side was my responsibility. (*discussion of setting up in Cyprus, difficult conditions, bad wires, mountainous country*) Zaehner felt that there wouldn't be sufficient support for it whether from London or the States. He lost interest. He left in the summer after the Ghavam incident. [**30 Tir** uprising for Mossadegh in July 1952.] Once he left that was it, he was an academic not a man of action.

In the early months of '53 we were building up with the Rashidians and we thought we had enough military units to mount something but London started getting cold feet. Eventually I received a direct order that the whole operation was to be run down. (Almost certainly Eden). Because he had failed to get support with the Americans etc. But they never got the message, and then I was given even clearer instructions saying you will and you will be monitored on the air to see whether it

gets through. As it happened that particular radio contact did fail and it was the next day that apologies starting flowing from ‘Hold your horses, the Americans have finally decided to come in...’ Roosevelt had been to see Sinclair and he had been to London and he wasn’t convinced that we could do it alone — he had to persuade the CIA and the American administration that it was a good idea. *[CIA’s Kermit Roosevelt, Jr., aka Kim Roosevelt]*

It was a gamble. Timing is always of the essence and secrecy: the Persians aren’t very good at either. Roosevelt was obviously convinced of the need to do something but he wasn’t sure that we could do it alone and he wasn’t sure if he could swing it in Washington.

tape ends continuing discussion of Roosevelt

Mossadegh rejected the last and final offer for mediation by the Americans.

The whole of **his book** is slanted as though the operation was totally carried out by the Americans and that the Shah recognized this.

[Countercoup: The Struggle for the Control of Iran, the 1979 memoir of Kermit Roosevelt] I wasn’t allowed to go back immediately when we picked up relations again because Americans were trying to cash in very quickly and trying to establish a special relationship with the Shah.

The Shah, as you know is a very complex character: he clearly looked to America as the main supplier of arms, of modern weapons, aircraft but he had a sneaking regard for what you might call British intelligence rather more than for the American CIA who were always bungling things. In the 50’s when he was reorganizing the infamous SAVAK *[secret police]* he turned to us rather than the Americans: it was then that the special relationship began and developed to such a stage that I was seeing him regularly once a fortnight in the 60’s.

At this point Ashraf became very important. *[The Shah’s twin sister,*



Ashraf Pahlavi] We met by prearrangement in Paris and I thought I had known her before, so that was alright. I said that I can guarantee you that we are speaking on behalf of the American government; I said that we would like to make quite sure that your brother understands the proposals that are being put to him in Tehran by the Rashidians; we would like you to go to Tehran and assure him that he has the approval of Washington that is to say that we would like you to tell him that we can guarantee that the proposals made by the Rashidians do carry our approval. We made it clear that we would pay expenses and when I produced a great wad of notes, her eyes alighted and she said that she would just have to go to Nice for a week to clear things up; eventually we said “Here is your first class ticket and you are booked for the day after tomorrow”, and this time I did let her get her hands on the money. She was quite a flighty woman and Steve, who fancied anything, fancied her. *[Stephen Meade of CIA, his American counterpart]*

This was 14th July and everyone was away from Paris, all our friends and the meeting wasn't until about [the] 16th: I had dozens of friends but they were all away for the weekend, and I rang and rang and so did Steve but there was nobody and so we found ourselves wandering around Paris. We were having a drink on the Champs Elysee and suddenly we were offered some postcards (*please note tape is very bad and rather muffled here...*) *story about selling postcards for four times what they paid.*

[pencilled in the margin: “Allen Dulles meeting Ashraf in Geneva?”]

Ashraf did in the end talk to the Shah because she gave him the message: you know the old wartime habit of using the BBC which is something they don't like doing at all in peacetime but we finally persuaded them and gave her the message saying that if you do this you will notice a slight variation on the presentation program and that once he heard that he himself would know that it was official. This was to

confirm that he could believe Ashraf and also [the] Rashidians...of course the name Roosevelt meant something to him but being of a suspicious nature it could have crossed his mind that Kim was saying this to him without it actually being 100% true and we wanted to hammer it home that it was and therefore we used the BBC. By July Churchill was in command; Eden was ill... [*Prime Minister Winston Churchill*] By '53, despite Eden's cold feet, the basic decision was we will go ahead with it as soon as we get the Americans in.

What happened in the talks between MI6 and the CIA — were you actually involved?

Yes. Washington, Cyprus, Rome, London. Immediately after I had been told to reestablish contact and this must have been in about March. Then the Americans came in with John Waller and Donald Wilber who had a certain background knowledge of Iran not because he was a member of the CIA.

You weren't of the impression that there were people within the CIA that did have doubts?

No. Give the CIA action for anything and they'll take it. They never came clean with us we came clean with them. I would have preferred to have gone in myself and acted instead of at the last minute to coordinate everything. I said all along that we should have back up in case something did leak or go wrong which it did and this is when it was decided to bring the boys out onto the streets. This happened in the early hours of a Sunday morning — Black Sunday — and it was all over by Wednesday. I was in Cyprus then. When it first went wrong I heard about it from Roosevelt and from the radio and from the Rashidians.

In order to try and get the Rashidians involved to try and save the day — would you say they did save the day?

Yes.

The role of Ardeshir Zahedi and Farzanegan who went over to the different units? [Point Four employee/son of Gen. Fazlollah Zahedi, and Col. Abbas Farzanegan]

They were to go to Kermanshah and Isfahan to get them to advance on the capitol.

George Carroll — CIA rebel rouser?

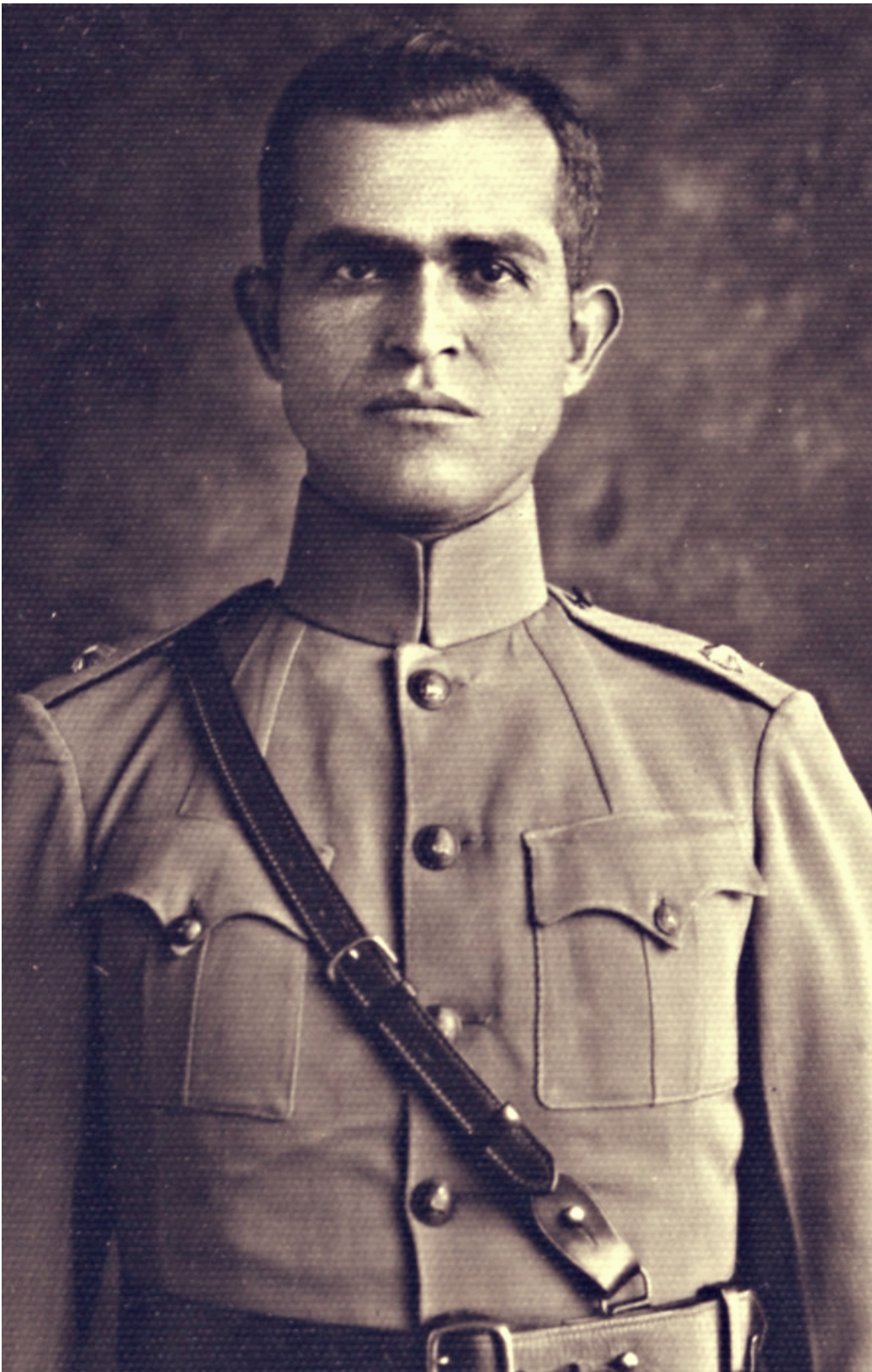
That's the word. His line was 'I'd just hang the bastards'. He was all for doing wild and peculiar things, very wild indeed. He was the CIA's paramilitary expert, commando type and he didn't speak Persian.

How important were the journalists?



What about the two day demonstrations. We spoke to someone who told us about people pulling down statues of the Shah. Was it psychologically a turning point?

Yes. It was sacrilege to do so there was more pro-Shah feeling than Mossadegh realized but once you start burning newspaper offices which are known to be pro-Mossadegh, the mob starts coming out and attacks the demonstrators and then it snowballs which is what we intended to do. It worked. It was the correct psychological reading of the Persian mob character. It was the Rashidians who provided people to infiltrate the demonstrations. I was personally giving orders and directing. It was a contingency plan because we had told them not to rely on Mossadegh folding.



Were you involved in [the] Afshartous assassination? *[Brig. Gen. Mahmoud Afshartous, Chief of National Police and Mossadegh loyalist]*

Yes. But it was never the intention that he should be killed. Something went wrong: he was kidnapped and held in a cave. Feeling ran very high and Afshartous was unwise enough to make derogatory comments

about the Shah. He was under guard by a young army officer and the young officer pulled out a gun and shot him. That was never part of our program at all but that's how it happened.

What was the purpose — was it to stop him retiring army officers?

Yes that was part of it. Also to give an indication that they couldn't have it all their own way and to boost the morale of of the opposition but that was a totally unexpected and certainly unplanned incident — it didn't help.

[Darbyshire's vague admission didn't account for why Afshartous' body was found severely tortured. Was this also spontaneous?]

Meetings with other Americans. Differences. What the British were hoping for — green light to go back in?

Dozens of meetings. Timing — whether or not the picture being built up of growing organization was correct or not; their contacts were saying you can't trust so and so and our contacts were saying you can and vice versa. How quickly we were going to recognize Zahedi. Over oil: it is quite true that the Americans wanted a special position over Iranian oil — it was clear the AIOC could never get back to what they had as more or less exclusive. Oil was discussed but not so much in political terms.

tape stops comes back

[Discussing Ayatollah Kashani, powerful Muslim cleric]



I think he was bought by us. I never got to the bottom of that but one didn't enquire when it had been successful. But he didn't play a role much in this. It is difficult to explain the Persian attitude to religion, as you've seen with Khomeini, the Shah grossly underestimated the

religious influence in Iran, but equally so did Mossadegh (he was not by any means a religious man). *[Mossadegh, like the Shah, was a Muslim]*

There is a thing in Iran which in Persian literally means the house of strength where they do all sorts of extraordinary athletic exercises with chains etc. to the chanting of the Koran by [a] highly trained drummer. *[zurkhaneh]* These are the tough boys and Kashani controlled some... [if] you could use them as street mob with the blessing of a **Kashani**, then the more the merrier.

Were we considering Kashani as a replacement for Mossadegh?

As I said I think he was bought but how far it would take him.

The letters from Middleton *[British Chargé d'affaires George Middleton]* **to Eden and Foreign Office: several of them say, we need to launch a coup d'état quite soon, particularly after the Ghavam thing...**

You don't think it was the election of Eisenhower which provided the turning point but it was something in around February...

Definitely.

Timing of the operation itself. What were you waiting for?

Very simple. Signature of the Shah.

*[The farmans (royal decrees) **dismissing** Mosadegh and appointing Zahedi as Prime Minister were **obtained** Aug. 14th, according to a recently released CIA document. Action was to begin at midnight, but ended up postponed till the following day.]*

Demonstration [on] July 21st — important turning point because the Tudeh demonstration was far larger than the nationalist. Americans saw the danger more clearly. But they had already decided by then. Timing was solely affected by the signature of the Shah.

Had it been even 10 days or a fortnight earlier — Kim was there in Tehran trying to persuade him to sign — it might have succeeded. With every passing day, word got around and word got to Mossadegh so he was ready. (I was only 29 but I had spent more or less 10 years in Iran) I think what would have happened is that you would have had Mossadegh with the country going into economic decline and promising the earth and not being able to deliver — gradually weakening on the political pressures [of] the Tudeh party, egged on by the Russians, who would have certainly pressed for total abolition of proscription and then more pressure to have more members, more portfolios in the cabinet than to the Tudeh party, then eventually a takeover. Then Russia would have achieved what she always wanted: access to the ports on the Gulf.

The failure wasn't immediately apparent. The Russians had burnt their fingers once and they didn't want to do it quite so quickly because it was a definite failure in Azerbaijan. Stalin had just died, [*Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin*] leadership was uncertain. (I wrote up the whole thing from beginning to end and that is definitely on file — that's what you want but I can't lay my hands on it) — I think I could persuade them to let me see it — officials can see their own papers)

Were the negotiations that took place in '52 essentially face-saving for the British?

Yes. They would have wanted to oust Mossadegh regardless of whether he would have signed an agreement favorable to the British — eventually they would have been forced to have considered getting rid of him to prevent a Russian takeover. I am convinced that was on the cards.

Was the embargo on oil sales that was going on important in rallying the opposition?

As the economics situation worsened: the better it was for it was easier for us because people began to realize that promises were empty.

If a settlement had meant starting up the oil industry again, it would not have necessarily been what you wanted.

No I think we were better off getting rid of him.

The fact that these ideas were accepted by the government meant that they weren't really interested in a settlement — Eden said so in his memoirs.

They had to go through the motions, but I think they would have given him a fair chance of making that settlement stick but they would have still reserved judgment on the internal position of Mossadegh even after an agreement for strategic reasons.

How much were they to do with keeping the Americans on our side?

tape ends

We were not getting on very well with Ghavam at the time who was then Prime Minister. Someone dreamt up the idea that it would be a good thing to have a free independent Persian radio broadcasting to Iran. Zaehner and I were commissioned to go to Jerusalem and using the facilities of [redacted] to run a free station, we got this set up and more or less ready to go on the air — there was fighting in Jerusalem. Eventually Sharkeladar [?] moved from Jerusalem to Cyprus where they went on being the most popular radio station in the Middle East until Suez. That was the end because it had no credibility and Nasser set up his rival station. [Gamal Abdel Nasser, future President of Egypt]

One person who was a senior officer in the Palestine police and eventually became a member of SIS is now retired was John Briance. He was in Iran too.

Wasn't there an army officer captured with a load of membership lists of the Tudeh party in 1954?

Yes. That was when the great executions took place. People had not realized how deeply Tudeh had infiltrated the army. Had we known how much they had infiltrated it would have been all the more reason to mount it as quickly as possible (*the coup*) — we knew that if they could infiltrate into the cabinet and into the army then you've got no control.

With the situation of chaos in internal Russia [it] meant that had they wanted to the Russians really couldn't have exploited the situation. They did not want to risk yet another failure following Azerbaijan — we were lucky. It had to work then or never. The policy makers view was affected once they got American support — everyone was in agreement that the sooner the better, get it over and done with. But it was perhaps a calculated risk.

Was there no opposition to the idea of a coup (in Britain that you were aware of)?

Until we lost the oil very few people thought about it politically — certainly didn't strike the general public.

Mossadegh's popularity.

A certain notoriety not popularity. It's like Sadat, 'Man of the Year' visiting Jerusalem — that didn't make him a terribly popular figure.

*[Egyptian President **Anwar Sadat**, named 1977 Man of the Year in TIME magazine, assassinated in 1981. Darbyshire was taking a crack*



at the **1951 Man of the Year, Mohammad Mossadegh**. *TIME's* cover story, however, posited that Mossadegh (who had just received a **hero's welcome in Egypt**) was, alas, exceedingly popular.]

Why were we able to do this successfully in Iran and yet it would not have succeeded in Egypt — was it because of the caliber of the man like Nasser compared with Mossadegh? What are the factors?

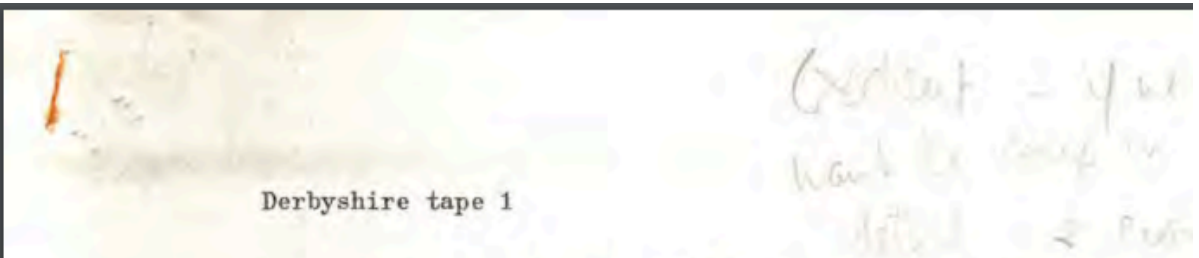
No we knew there were plots going on against Farouk. [*King Farouk, ousted in 1952*] It is the difference between the Iranian and the Egyptian character. The constitutional position which the Shah had was not occupied by anyone else; **Nasser** was a dictator who ousted Farouk — nobody was sorry to see him go.

[*Again, Darbyshire, like Kermit Roosevelt, and the Shah himself, maintained that the coup in Iran succeeded because it represented the popular will*]



tape 1

- The uncut version. [Click here](#) for a .pdf file of the original transcript.



Derbyshire tape 1

- The incomplete version with cut-outs. [Click here](#) for a .pdf file of the original transcript.

Addendum: A Mystery Solved

In response to an Aug. 2nd **article** in *The Guardian* [*MI6, the coup in Iran that changed the Middle East, and the cover-up*], the former editor of *The Observer*, Donald Trelford, has **clarified** the question posed in the film—who “leaked” the Darbyshire interview to the newspaper for Nigel Hawkes’ *End of Empire* review, and why?

Here’s Trelford’s explanation from an Aug. 10th column:

The other jolt came last week when an old friend tipped me off that I had been mentioned by name in an article in my old paper. This story went back even more than 35 years, to the US and British-backed coup that overthrew Mossadegh, the Prime Minister of Iran, in 1953. The article said “the background to the 1953 coup has been the cause of international suspicion and conjecture.”

It disclosed that the American CIA and the British MI6 had been deeply involved in the coup. My initial reaction was that this was hardly news. The CIA-MI6 involvement in the coup has been known about for decades. A friend in MI6, who had been involved himself, had told me about [it] in 1966. This had not been a matter of “international suspicion and conjecture”, but an established fact for a number of years.

The reason for the new story was to preview a documentary, called *Coup 53* and starring Ralph Fiennes, that is being shown in Britain next week. The documentary has “discovered” an *Observer* article published in 1985, while I was the Editor, containing an interview with an MI6 agent called Norman Darbyshire. [*“How MI6 and CIA joined forces to plot Iran coup” | May 26, 1985*]

In it he describes the dirty tricks used by the intelligence service, in partnership with the CIA, to get Iranian crowds onto the streets to



call for an end to Mossadegh's rule. It didn't mention the \$1 million bribe given to the Shah by the CIA to turn a blind eye to the coup. [The Shah was coerced, not bribed, into participating.]

The emergence of The Observer article of 1985 was presented as some sort of scoop when all that was needed was to look in the paper's archive.

The maker of the new documentary, an Anglo-Iranian called Taghi Amirani, says: "We still don't know who leaked this [interview] to The Observer."

Well, I can solve this mystery: the interview was simply given to us by Granada TV, so that we could give their forthcoming documentary some advance publicity. No investigative journalism was required.

The new documentary has also unearthed from Granada the film of the Darbyshire interview, which was not included in the version it aired. [No film was found, only the transcript.] Neither I nor my reporter on the story knew that the Darbyshire interview had been excluded from the programme. Granada didn't tell us. [Actually, Hawkes did write that "the MI6 man will not be seen; he declined to be filmed to protect his anonymity".]

Our guess is that after The Observer's preview appeared, Mr Darbyshire, who is now dead, either got cold feet or was warned that he would risk being prosecuted under the Official Secrets Act and withdrew permission for Granada to show it.

The paper says I “would have been told to go no further with the story, using a state provision known as a D-notice.” According to Mr. Amirani, “this smacks of a complete cover-up of British involvement to this day.”

I’m sorry to disappoint him, but I was not served with a D-notice; I was a press representative on the D-notice committee at the time and would have known.

And you can hardly cover up something that is already common knowledge.

[Even today there is no universal cognizance of this event, and Britain still has not officially admitted to it. In addition, many details of the coup, such as MI6’s connection to the murder of Afshartous, were obviously not common knowledge, hence the headlines generated by the release of the long-buried interview.]

Added August 26, 2020

Addendum: The Producers Speak

End of Empire: Iran researcher Alison Rooper, who interviewed Darbyshire, and producer-director Mark Anderson also responded to the *Guardian* article by Vanessa Thorpe in a joint **letter** published Aug. 16th.

They reveal that Darbyshire gave an anonymous interview which was *not* filmed, but do not explain why this “off-the-record” exchange was provided to reviewers if he was not included in the program. Nor do they comment on why Stephen Meade was excluded as well.

In *Coup 53*, Rooper said she believed Darbyshire was not filmed, but could not say for certain. Cameraman Humphrey Trevelyan, however,

said that he *was* filmed. Strangely, executive producer Brian Lapping, who should definitely know something, has apparently not spoken out or even been queried.

Our film was not censored

We produced Granada TV's 1985 film *End of Empire: Iran* mentioned in your article ("The British spy, a coup that changed the Middle East – and the cover-up", News, 2 August). The article suggested that interview material for our film was "censored" by government. It was not. Our film was the first to publicly reveal the policy of the British government and MI6 to promote and help organise the overthrow of Iran's democratically elected prime minister Mohammad Mossadegh.

The film contained the testimony of British officials and politicians who admitted – often with pride – their role in secretly funding the opposition to Mossadegh and pushing the British cabinet under both Attlee and Churchill to endorse a coup d'état. Britain's motive was to install a puppet regime that would reverse Mossadegh's nationalisation of Iranian oil and keep it in British hands. Our witnesses included the chargé d'affaires in Tehran, George Middleton, embassy official Sam Falle, Iran desk officials Peter Ramsbotham and Dennis Logan and Conservative MP Julian Amery.

British diplomats were expelled from Iran in 1952 for spying. In our film, embassy official Sam Falle describes accompanying Anthony Eden to the US to persuade the new Eisenhower administration to put CIA resources behind the coup. It told how MI6 and CIA operatives paid provocateurs to infiltrate peaceful protests with violence so that international newsreels could praise the military coup for restoring "law and order" in Iran.

As part of our research, we held an off-the-record conversation with MI6 agent Norman Darbyshire on condition of anonymity but did

not film the interview. The notes of this conversation were shared with the *Observer*, which previewed the film the day before it was shown on 26 May 1985 under the headline “How MI6 and CIA joined forces to plot Iran coup”. It explained: “The MI6 man will not be seen as he declined to be filmed to protect his anonymity. His evidence provides background for building up the picture of how the Foreign Office and MI6 managed to draw the Americans into the plot to overthrow Mossadegh.”

The new documentary, *Coup 53*, dramatises the character of Darbyshire with the help of our notes. Darbyshire’s refusal to speak on camera was standard policy for MI6 agents then as now. In 2013, the US National Security Archives released its Iran files and this has allowed writers and filmmakers to start to shed even more light on what CIA and MI6 agents did on the ground in Iran. [*The National Security Archive is a non-governmental project of George Washington University, nothing official*]

This research still doesn’t come easy because governments like to keep these things secret. But if we in Britain are to have an honest debate about the legacy of the British empire, the stories of what was done illegally and secretly in the Middle East by our politicians, government officials and MI6 must be told.

Alison Rooper and Mark Anderson

Added August 26, 2020



The U.S.-Britain Alliance To Erase Mossadegh Was Not Inevitable

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