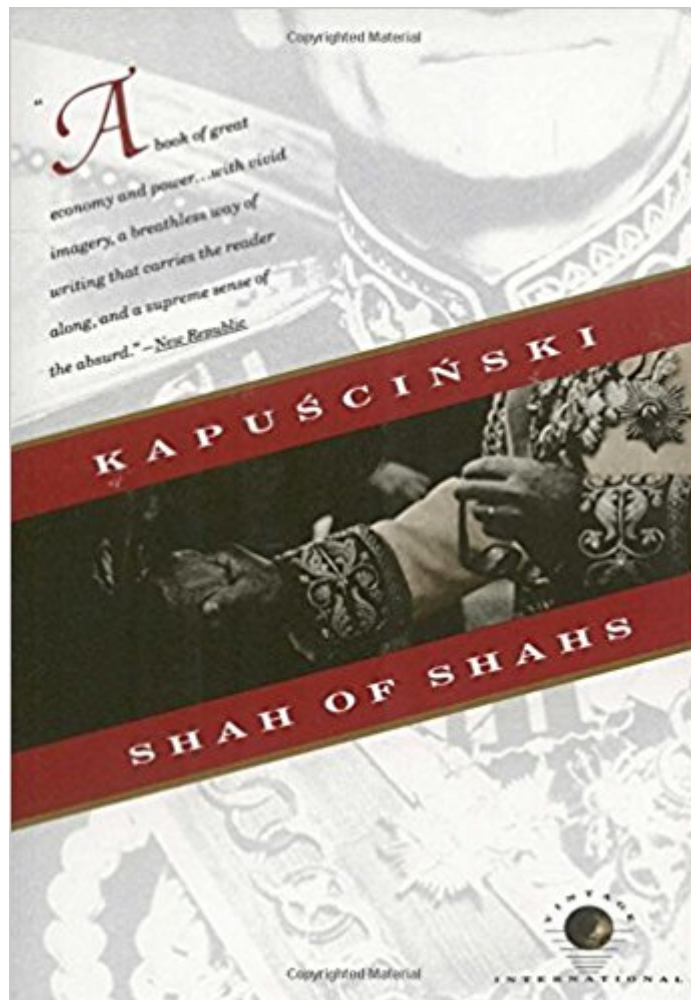


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Shah Of Shahs



Synopsis

In *Shah of Shahs* Kapuscinski brings a mythographer's perspective and a novelist's virtuosity to bear on the overthrow of the last Shah of Iran, one of the most infamous of the United States' client-dictators, who resolved to transform his country into "a second America in a generation," only to be toppled virtually overnight. From his vantage point at the break-up of the old regime, Kapuscinski gives us a compelling history of conspiracy, repression, fanaticism, and revolution. Translated from the Polish by William R. Brand and Katarzyna Mroczkowska-Brand.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"A book of great economy and power...with vivid imagery, a breathless way of writing that carries the reader along, and a supreme sense of the absurd." — "New Republic" Like Sir Richard Butron, Evelyn Waugh and Mungo Park, [Kapuscinski] makes literature out of journalism."

— "Newsweek" Insightful and important.... A readable, timely and valuable contribution to the understanding of the revolutionary forces at work in Iran.... The reader almost becomes a participant."

— "The New York Times Book Review" A supercharged particle of a book." — "Los Angeles Times

Text: English, Polish (translation) --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Great book with a finely tuned ear for the absurd. Truth, for an outsider, is indeed stranger and often more horrifying than fiction. As a secular westerner I could never understand how a people could choose a leader like the Ayatollah Khomeini. The background this book provides makes it plausible. He brings a fundamental respect for people and culture to this thoughtful analysis. It was the 27th revolution he had covered! Having read 'Shadow of the Sun' and 'The Emperor' by the same author I can see how respect and patient observations of difference afford a wisdom absent from many other social commentaries.

A. Modern Islam is built on its petroleum reserves, on the sense of divine favor that petroleum wealth confers. B. The "American Century" -- actually a half century at best -- ended with the fall of Shah Reza Pahlavi. C. Everything that has happened in Iran since 1954 is an extended consequence of the CIA overthrow of Mossadegh, the worst mistake in the history of American diplomacy. At least, that's how Iranians and most of the rest of the world interpret history. D. Recovery of sane social and political norms in Iran will eventually depend on the legacy of respect for Mossadegh and his brief era of democracy. E. The world is no longer an Anglophone sea. F. The late Shah's SAVAK made Tamerlane, Vlad the Impaler, and the Spanish Inquisition look like pussycats. G. Any Iranian who didn't celebrate the fall of the Shah was obviously on the Shah's payroll of clientage. H. Revolution, however justified and even salubrious, seldom or never brings out the best human qualities of the victors. If any of these premises seem unfounded or offensive, don't lambaste me! I'm just the reviewer, and these are my clumsily simplified extrapolations of Ryszard Kapuscinski's nuanced impressions, supposedly written on scraps in his hotel room in Teheran in 1980, at the end of Jimmy Carter's ineptitude but before Ronald Reagan's consummate covert idiocy. Kapuscinski was too subtle and artful an essayist ever to have been an ordinary journalist. His writing is too graceful to be merely what it seems. "Shah of Shahs" is an extreme example of Kapuscinski's indirection; it starts out as a collection of snapshots - literally! the first 'chapters' are labeled 'Daguerrotypes - innocuous impressions at most. As you read on, however, amused by the author's wit, the intensity of Kapuscinski's awed recognition of the significance of the Islamic Revolution builds and builds. Perhaps only an observer like Kapuscinski - an outsider to both sides of everything, a Pole, a man who traveled with Herodotus in his pocket of memory - could have written such a report, placing what he saw first hand the day before in the context of all recorded history. This book was written before the worst days of the Iran-Iraq War and the repression that has occurred under the clerical autocracy, but it is not dated. It's well worth reading today and it will continue to be a source for historians long into the future.

Harrowing and stupefying--while the Shah plays at monarchy and rushes heedlessly into abortive "modernization" attempts his answer to the KGB, Savak, instills such fear in the population that no one can say anything for fear of its being overheard and interpreted as disloyalty.

Lacking, either way, of the journalistic rigor expected from a journalist, this writing takes us through a wonderful voyage through the history of Iran during the the reign of the last Shah. Coupled with insightful observations and parallels with other revolutions the author has witnessed and researched, this book promises a deep and moving account of historical fact, while it brings the truth of dictatorship to an understanding well within reach of someone alien to its force. Highly recommended indeed.

Kapuscinski is one of the most informative and brilliant journalists you'll encounter. A truly fascinating read.

After reading a couple of Kapuscinski's works, the gold standard in my mind continues to be 'Another Day of Life' (his tale of the Angolan conflict). Still, though, it's tough to belittle in any fashion the work of a man who - as he notes late in the book - has just witnessed his 27th revolution in 'the Third World' (and I want to make clear it is the author, not the reviewer, that consigned the Iran of 1979 - 1980 to that category). This short book (no more than a couple of hours' read) does have a some insightful things to say about power, most notably how to abuse it, and how to squander it. And, for those wondering how Iran could shake off the shackles of plutocracy/kleptocracy and plunge into theocracy, Kapuscinski pithily comments: "The Shah left people a choice between Savak and the mullahs. And they chose the mullahs...It is not always the best people that emerge from hiding...but often those that have proven themselves strongest, not always those who will create new values but rather those whose thick skin and internal resilience have ensured their survival." Towards the end of the book (originally published in Polish in 1982 and first translated into English in 1985), pessimism sets in with Kapuscinski as he notes "the conservative hardliners gradually gained the upper hand over the enlightened and open ones." But, as he points out "a democracy cannot be imposed by force, the majority must favor it, yet the majority wanted what Khomeini wanted - an Islamic republic."

I enjoyed reading Shah of Shahs. It's written in a compelling format; a frame story about a reporter

organizing his material or cleaning up his hotel room. Holding at arm's length his research material Kapuscinski first describes what he's got; a photo or a newspaper clipping. Then he shares local intimacies telling how he came across this hinge of history. Finally an anecdote about some significant event. [On to the next note or photo.] In this way we learn details about the shah, his opponents and successors, slip into the atmosphere of the revolution, and begin to understand some of its causes and problems. It is not a complete account of the events leading to the Iranian revolution. Look elsewhere for that. In Shah of Shahs you'll find a brief narrative that fleshes out events and adds humanity to the details of history.

Splendid history-lesson!

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