Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps: 
Its Similarities to the Soviet KGB and the German SS and Gestapo 

Mark Silinsky

Abstract

Leaders of the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany forged quasi-totalitarian regimes based on their absolutist political philosophies. Similarly, the mullahs of the Islamic Republic of Iran aspired to craft a government that was totally governed by Shia Islamic law. All three countries used their intelligence and security services to maintain control. The SS, the KGB, and the Iranian Guards arrested, imprisoned, and killed those whom they considered enemies of the state. All three services were heavily ideological. The SS expressed the principles of Adolph Hitler, and the KGB reflected the ethics of Lenin and Stalin. The Iranian Guards were built in the image of Ayatollah Khomeini and continue to hold him as the exemplar.¹ This article focuses on five points of intersections of all three services: unlimited authority to secure and maintain power for the nascent government; guarding political prisoners; controlling foreign legions; grooming tomorrow’s leaders; and participating in the national economy.

Key Words: Iran, Islamic Republic, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, IRGC, SS, KGB; NKVD


Dr. Mark Silinsky – University of Haifa; silinsky@yahoo.com
Introduction

As this article goes to press, Iran is a mounting menace that could become an existential threat to its enemies. Its forces are deployed well beyond its borders. At home, legions of rage-filled, fist-clenched adherents parade the streets shouting allegiance to the Iranian Revolution and its ideals. The praetorian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – Sepāh e Pāsdārān e Enqelāb e Eslāmi, IRGC, or Guards – often lead them.

This article will compare and contrast the intelligence and security services of Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, and the Islamic Republic of Iran. All three services were built to protect authoritarian regimes against internal and external enemies. Their tactics were often ruthless, and they conducted extrajudicial killings. They operated political prisons and led foreign expeditionary forces. Two-of-three authoritarian political systems – Stalinism and National Socialism – are defunct, as are the services that kept them in power. Only Iran’s Islamic Republic and its Guards still exist, and they remain deeply embedded in Iranian society.2

The Guards have domestic and external missions. The Basij, the Guards’ morality and anti-riot police, are an inescapable presence in Iran. In uniform and civilian garb, the Basij enforce the mullahs’ social code. The Basij was established in 1980, first as an independent agency. It was merged into the Guards one year later. Khomeini dreamed of a twenty-million-strong army of pious, Shia youth recruited from a highly vetted grid of seminaries and universities, to create a “new Islamic civilization.”3

The services of all three countries were intertwined with and dependent upon the governments they served. They pledged allegiance to their leaders. German intelligence and security officers took personal oaths of loyalty to Adolf Hitler.4 Many SS men and

---


women followed Hitler until the war’s end. Similarly, leaders and a cadre of the Soviet services proved their loyalty to Stalin. Iran’s Guards, like the service personnel of Stalin’s Soviet Union and Hitler’s Germany, swear allegiance to their leader and to the principles of the Islamic revolution that transformed Iran. Finally, the Guards control a vast economic empire. Guards Inc. is slang for the Guards-controlled charities or bonyads: docks, banking, and construction enterprises.

**Point of Commonality One - Unlimited Power to Secure and Maintain Power for the Nascent Government**

The initial mission for all three services was to protect the young governments of the Soviets, Nazis, and revolutionary Iranians. The leaders of all three governments – the Soviets, Nazis, Iranian revolutionaries – fundamentally transformed their countries and eliminated vestiges of the old regimes. None of these services were bounded by traditional notions of Christian compassion or modern concepts of human rights. Instead, leaders of all three services were open and clear about their intentions to root out and destroy all opposition to their governments. All three services enjoyed vast and often absolute power. All three services had considerable latitude to harass, arrest, beat, and kill suspected opponents.

The Soviet Union

Almost immediately after the communists seized power in Russia, its new leadership created its intelligence and security service. As with the Nazis and the Iranians, the Bolsheviks determined to consolidate ruthlessly their control on power. On December 20, 1917, Soviet leaders established the Extraordinary Commission to Fight Counter-Revolution and Sabotage. Its stated mission was to crush all those who would sabotage the machinery of the nascent government and to suppress uprisings of former soldiers.\(^9\) This mission quickly expanded to include punishing those who were profiteers or bandits.

Early in its existence, the Cheka began to put in place a network of secret informants in all strata of society.\(^{10}\) In June 1922, Lenin signed a law giving the government the right to kill anyone deemed an enemy of the state. In response to the assassinations and attempted assassination of Soviet leaders, the Cheka was given virtually unchecked power to detain, torture, incarcerate, and kill perceived enemies of the state.\(^{11}\) After a disgruntled revolutionary, Fanya Kaplan, attempted to assassinate Lenin, the Soviet paper Pravda exclaimed, “To the wall with all those who agitate against the Soviet power. Ten bullets for everyone who raises a hand against it.”\(^{12}\) On November 5, 1918, all sections of the Cheka were authorized to shoot class enemies or incarcerate them in concentration camps. Lenin began his war on intellectuals by shooting them indiscriminately, deporting them, or forcing them out. This model would be used by the Nazis and the revolutionary Iranian leaders.

This power of the Cheka was far greater than the license the Czar granted his intelligence service, the Okhrana.\(^{13}\) The Okhrana could order summary executions


\(^{13}\) Butler, *Stalin’s Secret Police*, p. 39.
only in extraordinary circumstances, such as peasant uprisings. The Okhrana targeted dissenting intellectuals and Jews, but did not attempt to annihilate entire strata of society. However, the Cheka and its successive iterations were unshackled. The Cheka declared in a government-controlled newspaper, “Ours is a new morality. To us, everything is permitted, for we are the first in the world to raise the sword not for the purpose of enslavement and oppression, but in the name of liberty and emancipation from slavery. We do not wage war against individuals. We seek to destroy the bourgeoisie as a class.”14 Similarly, the Nazis would destroy entire groups of perceived enemies – communists, liberals, Jews, free thinkers – and Iran’s revolutionaries would force out or imprison those suspected of being Westernized.

Under Felix Dzerzhinski’s energetic direction, the Cheka rapidly extended its controls into the state-controlled economy, slave labor, wealth confiscation, and extra-legal methods of repression. It was particularly active in the fields of transportation and industry.15 By 1921 the Cheka had built corps of frontier guards and paramilitary forces. It had troops inside the regular army as “Special Sections” to discourage and ferret out potential disloyal elements.16

In the two decades following the Bolshevik seizure of power, Cheka continued to expand its influence and list of enemies. In August 1937, Cheka authorities subjected kulaks, criminals, and other groups of persons considered to be anti-Soviet to likely execution.17 Less-hostile anti-Soviet elements would be tried by a three-person tribunal and sentenced to long or indeterminate periods in concentration camps.18 This unbridled power continued into the Khrushchev era.

16 Ibid, p. 37.
18 Ibid.
From the inception of the Soviet state, the Soviet services sent *Illegals*, multi-lingual Soviets who assumed foreign identities, abroad to surveil and sometimes kill targets.\(^{19}\) A legendary assassination was the bludgeoning of the well-protected Trotsky in Mexico. His death carried a message that no critic of Stalin was safe. Soviets murdered defectors in the West.\(^{20}\) The Nazis, too, killed high profile enemies beyond their borders – as do the Iranians.

**Nazi Germany**

Founded in 1922, the Schutzstaffel was initially called the Adolf Hitler Shock Troops. Much as the early cadre of the Cheka shielded Lenin, and the party’s core leadership, the original band of the SS served as a bodyguard for Adolf Hitler.\(^{21}\) Heinrich Himmler joined the Nazi Party in 1923, and six years later, he was chief of the SS. By the mid-1930s, he was one of the most powerful men in Europe.\(^{22}\) Himmler molded the SS into his view of a racial hierarchy, and used his organization to destroy Jewish communities. Hitler’s *Night and Fog* decree targeted political opponents for incarceration or summary execution. The SS and the Gestapo would arrest suspected opponents of the state during night and fog, and sometimes the detainees would not be heard of again.

Now-Reichsführer Himmler continued to consolidate power to create a capable Nazi police state. The Gestapo, formerly the political police of the various German states, were now united into a Reich-wide force for ferreting out and eliminating all opposition to the Nazi regime. Like the Cheka, the SS and the Gestapo could target all threats to the Nazi’s social order.\(^{23}\)

---

Nothing in Germany’s past, even under the profoundly authoritarian regime of generals Ludendorff and Hindenburg during World War I, approximated the total power that the SS and its branches held in the Nazi era. As with the Cheka in the Soviet Union, the SS could arrest, interrogate, incarcerate, and execute those deemed enemies of the state for virtually any reason.

As with the Soviet services and the IRGC, the SS had elite paramilitary units. The Waffen SS was usually better trained, provisioned, equipped, led, and more politically indoctrinated than were units in the regular army. As with the Soviet and Iranian services, there was a close connection between the concentration camp system and SS combat units. Nazi ideology was deeply engrained in the ethos of the SS. They were also heavily involved in mass murder.24 For these reasons, leaders of the Allied forces held deep animus against the SS, which would express itself in the Nuremberg and subsequent post-war trials.

The IRGC

The new regime built the IRGC to protect the government and identify and eliminate its enemies.25 The new constitution declared the mission of the IRGC to be protection of both the leaders and the revolution. Like the Cheka and the SS, the Guards served as bodyguards for the newly installed, still-fragile revolutionary regime.26 As in the Soviet Union and Germany, Iranian political leaders, satirists, liberal activists, and former associates of the Shah’s regimes lived in a state of high anxiety waiting for knocks on the door by security personnel.27

Iranian leaders, like those of the Soviets and the Nazis, ordered enemies of the state tracked and killed abroad.28 Some attacks were carried out by the Guards and

25 Wehrey, Green et al., The Rise of the Pasdaran: Assessing the Domestic Roles of Iran A’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (Santa Monica, CA; Arlington, VA; Pittsburgh, PA: RAND, 2009), pp. 77-92.
others by the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) operatives. Like Stalin, Khomeini sometimes personally signed the death writs, as many as 500, of enemy exiles.\textsuperscript{29} Some slayings were well-planned and professionally executed, while others were conducted ineptly.\textsuperscript{30}

During the 1980s and 1990s, Iranian operatives across the world engaged in assassinations targeting opposition figures in the U.S., France, Sweden, Switzerland, and Germany. In Argentina, Iran-backed groups were accused of the deadly bombings of the Israeli embassy in 1992 and a Jewish community center in 1994, attacks that left 115 people dead.\textsuperscript{31}

Most of the high-profile foreign assassinations occurred in the 1990s. They were carried out by both the IRGC and MOIS. Germany was home to almost 100,000 Iranians who had fled the revolution. Iran used diplomatic facilities to gather intelligence on exile opposition forces in Europe.\textsuperscript{32}

The most notorious assassination that captured world headlines was the August 1991 killing of the Shahpour Bakhtiar, the Shah’s last prime minister. He was stabbed to death at his home outside Paris. Immediately, Iranian exiles asserted that the slaying was the work of a hit squad from Tehran. An anti-clerical political scientist and booster of democracy, Bakhtiar served six years in jail for political activism during the time of the Shah.\textsuperscript{33} He had proven liberal credentials and took great risks as a young man. He


fought in Spain with the loyalists against Franco. He later helped the French resistance against the Nazis.\(^{34}\)

Much like Trotsky in Mexico, Bakhtiar had a well-guarded villa. But Bakhtiar’s stronghold was insufficient to keep out assassins. As with Trotsky, Bakhtiar was killed by a family friend who had accomplices. The murderer was captured and imprisoned in France but was released in 2010 in a prisoner exchange.

Most Iranian embassies serve as centers for diplomacy, espionage, and clandestine operations. The Guards and MOIS operatives mask their true identities by assuming the roles of cultural attaches or military officers. This is standard tradecraft used by intelligence services worldwide. What separates the Iranian service personnel assigned to embassies from the staffs of most other countries is the frequency of assassination. Iranians have used their embassies in Middle Eastern countries like Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, and Syria to plan and conduct assassinations.\(^{35}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Soviet Services</th>
<th>Nazi Services</th>
<th>Iranian Services</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Initial Mission</strong></td>
<td>Protected the revolution and its leaders. Killed leaders of the Tsarists regime who could not escape.</td>
<td>Bodyguards for Adolf Hitler. Protected Nazi party leaders and arrested, incarcerated, or killed opponents. Partner with the Gestapo.</td>
<td>Protected the 1979 revolution. Controlled or eliminated enemies from the Shah or Western powers. Stabilized the regime. Partnered with MOIS.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mission Abroad</strong></td>
<td>Tracked down and eliminated vestiges of Tsar’s power or that of Trotsky. Influenced and controlled communist parties throughout the world.</td>
<td>Promoted pro-Nazi subversion and assassinations. Controlled Nazi empire and exterminated undesirables, particularly Jews.</td>
<td>Eliminated enemies of the new regime or those suspected of being too close to the Shah, such as Bakhtiar.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


\(^{35}\) Borzou Daragahi, “Iranian Assassins are Back with a Vengeance, or so it seems,” *The Daily Beast*, July 13, 2018.
### Table 1 Secure and Maintain Power for the Government

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Soviet Services</th>
<th>Nazi Services</th>
<th>Iranian Services</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Paramilitary Units</strong></td>
<td>Border guards, elite military units, prison guards</td>
<td>Waffen SS, foreign SS units.</td>
<td>Qods Force and Basij units, some of which fought against Iraq in the 1980s.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Point of Commonality Two – Guarding Political Prisons**

All three services had prominent roles in administering political prisons and concentration camps. These camps and prisons are distinguished from prisons in non-authoritarian states by their extensive incarceration of political prisoners and the level of cruelty.

**Soviet Union**

Russia held political prisoners well before the creation of the Soviet Union. The Peter and Paul Fortress, founded by Peter the Great, held political radicals in the 19th and early 20th centuries. When the communists set up a government in Moscow, they used the Lubyanka Prison to incarcerate and kill their enemies. Soon, the Cheka built *ad hoc* facilities and, then, a constellation of long-term camps that became known by the acronym “GULAG” or Glavnoe upravlenie ispravitel’notrudovykh lagerei i kolonii, the Main Administration of Corrective-Labor Camps and Colonies. Under Stalin, camps mushroomed throughout the Soviet Union.

The camp guards controlled the prisoners in the camps and work sites, guarded buildings, and tracked down prisoners who escaped. The Cheka’s torture was not

---


37 “What Was the Gulag?” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 16:3 (2015), [https://georgetown.app.box.com/s/e2u9icnco7g8mxw4gcsjmygc6le8rbs](https://georgetown.app.box.com/s/e2u9icnco7g8mxw4gcsjmygc6le8rbs) (Accessed on May 11, 2020).

concealed. The GULAG held political prisoners for several reasons. Camps were killing sites for political prisoners. Inmates died from privation, starvation, exhaustion, or execution. GULAG leaders would shift inmates to areas of the Soviet Union that needed slave labor. The prisoners were hired out as slave labor. As many as 20 million were imprisoned in GULAG system.

**Nazi Germany**

As did the Soviets, the Nazis built concentration camps very early in their tenure. As the Nazis’ reach expanded, the concentration camp system, which was under the control of the SS, expanded its role to extermination. Initially, those interned in concentration camps were those of undesirable races, particularly but not exclusively Jews; persons of certain nationalities, particularly those viewed as encompassing lesser races, such as Slavs; religious persons not submissive to Hitler; and political dissenters, usually liberals. Camps also existed as a deterrent to terrorize dissident elements in society. The SS intermixed businessmen, accountants, and engineers.

Just as the Lubyanka was associated with Stalin’s Soviet services, Auschwitz became synonymous with mechanized mass murder and sadism. Planet Auschwitz, a term coined by a survivor of that death camp, was a world of inverted values. Cruelty was hailed as virtuous, and compassion was shunned as weakness.

---

40 Ibid.
Iran
The Guards and MOIS control some facilities for political prisoners in Evin prison. The intelligence unit, answerable directly to the supreme leader’s direct authority, protects Khamenei if he feels threatened. The unit’s resurgence: Hassan Rouhani when he became president in the summer of 2013.

An eclectic corps of regime opponents — liberals, leftists, and Islamists — bunked next to each other. Under the revolutionary regime, the prison earned the moniker Iran’s Torture Chamber.

After 1979, Iran’s prisons’ populations swelled well beyond existing capacity. Facilities were inundated with political prisoners, and the confusion and despair of the teeming, newly incarcerated inmates became palpable. Many political prisoners were executed near the prisons, in local forests or clearings. Often prisoners were killed without trial. They were rounded up, shot, piled on trucks, and tossed into mass, unmarked graves near towns.

Iranian prisons would not reach the death counts of the German concentration camps or the Soviet Gulag. However, Iranian prisoners face similarly grim prospects when they enter the prisons’ gates. The regime claims that those whom they execute are murderers, rapists and drug traffickers. Human-rights activists counter that many of those killed are regime opponents. Iran has the world’s second-highest annual rate of executions in the world, after China.

45 The intelligence unit, answerable directly to the supreme leader’s direct authority, protects Khamenei if he feels threatened. The unit’s resurgence: Hassan Rouhani when he became president in the summer of 2013.


48 By 1934 all penal institutions were unified in the branch of the NKVD soon to be named the Main Administration of Camps, or GULAG. See Michael Jakobson, Origins Of The Gulag: The Soviet Prison Camp System, 1917-1934 (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1993), pp. i-vi.


50 According to Iranian human rights activists, in 2011 Iran carried out at least 676 executions. Of these, 65 were carried out in public, and another 416 were announced by the Iranian authorities. See “Annual Report on the Death Penalty in Iran- 2017,” Iran Human Rights, March 13, 2018, https://iranhr.net/en/reports/19/ (Accessed on April 12, 2020).
The Pasdaran casts its wide net to imprison non-conformist political activists, out-of-favor journalists, students, religious dissidents, common criminals, political rivals, and those who are considered enemies of the state or of the revolutionary spirit. Thousands accused of trying to overthrow the regime have been jailed. Often, the charges are vague.51 Reporters without Borders, a watchdog organization of journalists, ranked Iran 169th out of 180 countries in its 2018 World Press Freedom Index.52 In Iran, death row inmates are often executed on short notice without the families of the condemned being notified. The preferred methods of execution for women and girls are hanging and shooting.53 Some of the killings are conducted by the prison guards, others by IRGC personnel, and others by MOIS.

The camps of the Soviets and Nazis were strewn with corpses and mass graves. Killings were conducted both randomly and methodologically. In Iran, there have been mass murders of political prisoners. Khomeini established special commissions to select prisoners for stockyard-like killings; they became known as the “Death Commission.”54 Known as the Massacre of '88, up to 7,000 were murdered in the Evin assembly hall in summer 1988. Prisoners were herded in groups of six and were hanged. The bodies were transferred to mass graves in meat trucks at night. On some nights, up to 400 were executed and their bodies were tossed into a make-shift, large grave.55 Relatives of those

killed called the point of execution as the “Flower Garden,” but others know it as the “place of the damned.”\textsuperscript{56}

Life is generally more humane in Iran’s political wards than was life in the Soviet and German concentration camps. There is no evidence of industrial-scale mass murder or large-scale forced death through privation. Germans killed tens of thousands in some days of their rule. In the Soviet Union, Historian Richard Pipes has calculated that more than 1,000 people each day were executed over the course of 1937 and 1938.\textsuperscript{57,58}

If there has been less mechanized murder in Evin prison, there is ample evidence of lurid torture. The Guards and MOIS control wards within Evin. They are administrated separately from the main Evin prison management.\textsuperscript{59} Evin Prison, Ward 209 in Tehran, is run by the MOIS, and Ward 350 and Ward 2 are run by the Guards.\textsuperscript{60} The U.S. State Department has also cited the Guards-run Ward 2 as a place of prolonged torture, including: threats of execution or rape, sleep deprivation, electroshock and burnings, and severe and repeated beatings.\textsuperscript{61}

Ward 209 is a secret detention center for political prisoners located within Evin Prison. It is operated by the MOIS and has solitary confinement cells.\textsuperscript{62} In these and other prisons,


\textsuperscript{58} In 1937, the apex of Stalin’s purges, some 936,750 individuals were arrested, of whom 353,074 were killed; in 1938, 638,509 were arrested, of whom 328,618 were killed. Source: Jonathan Brent, “Potemkin Prisons: Inside the Museum of the Gulag,” The Criterion, May 2009, \url{http://www.payvand.com/news/08/aug/1316.html} (Accessed on April 22, 2020).


MOIS and Guards carry out extra-judicial executions.\(^63\) Detention centers, built to hold people for several days during in-processing, have only several toilets for hundreds of detainees. Access to medical care is often denied.\(^64\) The cells are overcrowded, and many inmates are forced to sleep on the floors of hallways or in filthy cells. The Guards have a reputation for brutality. Said one prisoner, “They use any tool—even toilets, showers, water, and tea.”\(^65\)

Political prisoners undergo physical abuse, often in the MOIS’s 209 torture room, which is located in the basement.\(^66\) IRGC operatives torture the incarcerated to break their spirit. Mental and psychological torture include conveying false news and information, threats of flogging, and threatening family members. Prisoners endure beatings during interrogations, sleep deprivation, being dunked into cold water, and paraded naked outside in cold weather.\(^67\)

For many prisoners in the Guards-operated Ward 350, prison life is tedious, punctuated by surges of fear and periods of brutality.\(^68\) There is a sanitized library, but no books or newspapers are permitted inside solitary cells.\(^69\) Life in solitary cells is disorienting.

---

\(^63\) The International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, Reporting on Executions in Vakilabad Prison. See testimony of former inmates, such as that of Ahmad Ghabel. Executions carried out in Vakilabad Prison have been primarily for drug-related crimes. Source Lawrence Franklin, “Iran’s Prison Archipelago,” Gatestone Institute, July 23, 2015, [https://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/6202/iran-prison-archipelago](https://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/6202/iran-prison-archipelago) (Accessed on April 22, 2020).


\(^65\) Franklin, Iran’s Prison Archipelago, p. 27.


\(^69\) Ibid.
Prisoners lose track of time.\textsuperscript{70} Each prison cell in Ward 350 measures approximately 98 square feet and houses 16-20 prisoners.\textsuperscript{71} Sometimes, collective beatings are delivered spontaneously, such as the April 2014 thrashing, when dozens of security guards and senior prison officials attacked and severely beat political prisoners being held in Ward 350.\textsuperscript{72} Some prisoners are famous. Esfandyar Rahim Mashaei, one-time first vice president and chief of staff to former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, was an inmate there, having been convicted of being an enemy of the state.\textsuperscript{73}

The conditions in Evin and other prisons have become a rallying point for civil rights advocates. Sometimes family and friends will stand outside of Evin to protest incarceration. On occasion the demonstrations are loud, and sometimes they are silent.\textsuperscript{74} Some may have taken inspiration from German wives of incarcerated Jewish men, in the winter of 1943. The women stood in front of a Berlin ad hoc incarceration center and shouted to the Guards, “Give me back my husband!”\textsuperscript{75} Soviet Refusniks organized publicly to garner attention to their cause. In 1974, a handful of protesters stood openly and defiantly in front of embassies in Moscow clamoring for exit visas. Years later, in Teheran, a mother organized a sit-in to protest the jailing of her daughter in Evin.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{70} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{73} “Iran’s Former Vice President Transferred To Evin Prison,” \textit{BBC Monitoring Middle East}, January 14, 2019.
\end{itemize}
Mental Hospitals

Iranian leaders, like those in the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, misused the diagnosis of mental illness to incarcerate and execute political dissidents. Soviet physicians swore to serve communism.76 Soviet psychiatrists systematically suppressed dissent by interning and sedating free spirits and misdiagnosing them as mentally ill.77 Those who found faults in the Party’s philosophy and in the rule of the Party were declared to be either enemies of the state or mentally disturbed. Some illness were diagnosed as “sluggish schizophrenia” or “delusion of reformism.”78

In Germany, National Socialism billed itself as “applied biology,” and psychiatrists directly collaborated in the mass murder of the mentally ill. Most of the killing took place in six psychiatric institutions. Psychiatrists oversaw the killing of over 200,000 patients by gassing, starvation, and injection of poisons.

In Iran, high-profile critics of Khomeinism can be arrested and imprisoned in mental hospitals. A retired teacher and member of the teachers’ union was incarcerated in a mental hospital after being arrested by the Guards. His family was prevented from visiting him at the Ibn Sina Psychiatric Hospital in Mashhad.79 The teacher was a civil rights activist who earlier served two years in prison.80 He had no history of mental illness.

Point of Commonality Three - Controlling Foreign Legions

In several significant wars of the 20th century, armies used foreign nationals to augment their ranks. Units of foreign nationals sometimes fought as independent-but-affiliated units. Sometimes they were inducted directly into the host armed forces. At other times, foreign nationals fought in international divisions. The subject of novels and folklore, the French Foreign Legion is the most famous and enduring model. The Soviets and Nazis, too, used foreign nationals. Soviets recruited and commanded international battalions and brigades to fight against fascists in Spain, and Germany built divisions to fight its enemies. So did Iran.

Soviets in the Spanish Civil War

The Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, and Iran commanded foreign personnel in units often called international bridges or international divisions. The Soviet NKVD recruited communists and anti-fascists to fight in Spain from 1936-1939. The Soviet NKVD recruited and trained at Moscow’s behest. Many of the recruits were dedicated to the cause of the Soviet Union and saw considerable military action. Each battalion’s commander was a Stalin loyalist and confirmed communist. Most of the 35,000 volunteers of the Soviet International Brigades had scarlet leanings, and many were dedicated communists. Britain’s Bloomsbury intellectuals and American celebrity journalists romanticized the International Brigades.

Germany

Germans also created international units. During World War II, SS leader Himmler built international divisions of SS to fight for the Reich, particularly after the defeat at

---

81 The literature on the Civil War sometimes refers to the battalions as brigades. The International Brigade was an umbrella term of subordinate units - British Battalion, Lincoln Battalion, Dimitrov Battalion were among the larger and better known.


84 Palmer, “The Battle to Remember.” pp. 94-100, 102-103, 106.
Stalingrad, in early 1943. The 13th Mountain Division of the Waffen SS, the Handschar, recruited Balkan Muslims, and the Mufti of Jerusalem, then living in Berlin, called them to Jihad. They fought for Hitler. Volunteers in the German SS were often true believers in the Nazi cause. Some were unemployed men who had faced high unemployment in Europe and who admired Germany’s financial recovery under National Socialism.

Iran

Like the Soviets and the Germans before them, Iranian leaders have built a legion of foreign volunteers to fight for a common cause. These divisions wear a standard uniform and carry a single banner. The Shi’a Liberation Army is composed of three divisions that are commanded by Iranians. These divisions are the Afghan division, the Fatemiyoun; the Pakistani division, the Zaynabiyoun; and the Iraqi division, Hayderiyoun. Iran also underwrites Hezbollah.

There are three underlying reasons why Afghans, Iraqis, and Pakistanis join the SLA. They are poverty, religion, and resentment. The Middle East is teeming with poverty.

85 Most countries allied with or under the occupation of Germany to include - French, Spanish, Belgian, Czech, Hungarian, Italian, Balkan, Finnish, Norwegian. Smaller units included British and Arabs. Divisions included the SS Viking; Fleming Division; 1st Ukrainian Division; Cossack Division; Charlemagne Division; Nederland Division; Nord Division; Handschar Division are among the larger and more well know.

86 After the Axis were defeated, nearly 4,000 made their way to Syria to fight with the Arab Liberation Army against Palestinian Jews. Source: Seth J. Frantzman. “Strange Bedfellows,” Jerusalem Post. May 7, 2008 https://www.jpost.com/Magazine/Features/Strange-bedfellows (Accessed on April 22, 2020).

87 McGregor, “In the Uniform of the Enemy,” p. 32.


89 Tobias Schneider, “The Fatemiyoun Division: Afghan Fighters in the Syrian Civil War,” Middle East Institute, 2018. 6-8.

90 The Iranian regime recruits young men from among these refugees to fight in Syria as part of the Afghan division. The fighters receive a monthly stipend, and if they fall in battle, their families’ social status is enhanced.

Many recruits are unemployed, underemployed, and have few prospects at home. Many Middle Eastern and South Asian Shi’a men are unemployed, depressed, and destitute. They need to provide for themselves and their families, and they see service in the SLA as a means to do so.

Many recruits are religiously devout and find Khomeinism appealing. Just as some Westerners were drawn to the Soviet cause in the Spanish Civil War or the Nazi cause in World War II, many Shi’a see Iran as an advocate for their purpose. In Iraq, they guard Najaf and Karbala, two places particularly revered by Shi’a.

Another reason is resentment of the secondary social, religious, and economic status the Shi’a hold in many Sunni-dominated countries. Historically, Shi’a needed to hide their religious status when they lived under the suzerainty of the Sunni. They continue to live under the sufferance of Sunni in many countries.

The Guards Qods Force is Iran’s direct mechanism for projecting Iran’s power in the Greater Middle East and elsewhere. Since 1979, the Islamic Republic has supported Shi’a militias abroad. By 2018, Iran controlled or heavily influenced four capitals of Middle Eastern states - Damascus, Beirut, Baghdad, and Sanaa. The Guards control divisions of foreign fighters, just as the Soviets commanded international brigades during the Spanish Civil War, and the Nazis commanded SS divisions during World War II, some of which were foreign divisions.

---

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Names of Notable Units</th>
<th>NKVD Foreign Forces in Spain</th>
<th>Waffen-SS Foreign Divisions during World War II</th>
<th>Qods Force – Controlled Forces</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>British Battalion;</td>
<td>SS Viking; Fleming Division;</td>
<td>Fatemiyoun Division – Afghans; Zaynabiyoun -</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lincoln Battalion;</td>
<td>1st Ukrainian Division;</td>
<td>Pakistani Division; Hayderiyoun - Iraqi</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sixth February Battal</td>
<td>Cossack Division; Charlemagne</td>
<td>Division; Hezbollah - the Lebanese Shi’a</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ion; 24 Battalion;</td>
<td>Division; Nederland Division;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dimitrov Battalion are</td>
<td>Nord Division; Handschar</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>among the larger and better known</td>
<td>Division are among the more significant and better known</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationalities</td>
<td>Most countries allied with or</td>
<td>Afghan, Pakistanis, Iraqis, and Lebanese, among others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British, Irish,</td>
<td>under the occupation of Germany, including French, Spanish, Belgian, Czech, Hungarian, Italian, Balkan, Finnish, Norwegian. Smaller units included British and Arabs. Many others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American, French,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German, Italian,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polish, Belgian,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban, Canadian,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balkan; A total of 50 countries represented</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theater of Operations</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>European theater of operations</td>
<td>Greater Middle East, most notably Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operational Control</td>
<td>Commanded by NKVD operatives</td>
<td>Commanded, generally, by German SS officers</td>
<td>Commanded by Qods Forces officers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military Capabilities</td>
<td>Few professional soldiers; many were brave but untrained</td>
<td>A broad spectrum of capabilities. The Viking and Nord Divisions were highly regarded by Allied and Axis military observers. Some units, such as the mostly Muslim Handschar Division, performed relatively poorly</td>
<td>Some units, namely Hezbollah, are relatively professional and highly trained by the standards of Middle Eastern armies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results</td>
<td>35,000 combatants; half became casualties</td>
<td>Total of 275,000 foreign personnel in all divisions at the maximum strength of each division¹</td>
<td>International divisions still deployed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 Selected Foreign Military Units under the Control of the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, and Iran

Point of Commonality Four - Grooming Tomorrow’s Leaders

The services of all three states had some hand in grooming their countries’ youth. They did this to ensure a steady pipeline of top talent from secondary schools and universities into the ranks.

Soviet Union

Indoctrination programs of Iranian youth became eerily comparable to those of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Youth groups proliferated in the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, and in Iran today. In their political development, a Soviet child first became a Little Octoberist and then a Young Pioneer. The motto of Young Pioneers was “We promise to . . . love and cherish the Motherland passionately, to live as the great Lenin bade us, as the Communist Party teaches us . . .”97 Orphans were raised in collective homes where the state molded them.98 The young in Russia and Germany were trained to spy on their classmates, friends, enemies, and parents.99 High achievers would often be offered tracks to careers in the Soviet services.

Nazi Germany

Hitler established the Hitler Youth to attract young people to the Nazi Party in 1925.100 Its leaders mobilized young Germans to serve Nazi ends.101 As in the Soviet Union and the Islamic Republic, children were required to become members of the single, national youth organization. From 1939, 82 percent of German boys and girls between the ages of 10 and 18 belonged to Hitler Youth or an affiliate. Boys were drilled by military jingoism

and participated in paramilitary and full-contact athletics. The girls were groomed by campfire romanticism, folklore, and traditional themes of motherhood. Hitler Youth forged uniformity of dress, haircut, behavior, thought, and activity. It hammered out any deviations and idiosyncrasies. High performers of the Hitler Youth were a pool of recruitment for the SS, itself an elite organization.

As Hitler’s war fortunes fell, his generals turned to untapped ranks of 17- and sometimes 16-year-old boys. This led to the creation of the 12th SS Panzer Division “Hitlerjugend, which was an armored division of the Waffen-SS. The majority of its combatants were drawn directly from Hitler Youth. They first saw combat on June 7, 1944 in Normandy against invading Allied forces. Hitler Youth soldiers committed war crimes against French civilians.

Deeply committed to the Nazi cause and bonded together by training and combat service, the Hitler Youth formed a defensive bulwark in the last days of the war. They earned the reputation of being among Hitler’s fiercest fighters. Many died fighting alongside the SS in Berlin streets as the Soviet Army approached.

Iran

Iranian leaders determined to develop indoctrinated and religiously committed generations of future leaders. As in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, national leaders groom youth to carry on the intelligence and security services. The Basij mold children to retain a devotion to the ideals of the Revolution. As grade schoolers become middle schoolers, the

---

girls are guided towards domesticity and the boys towards martial and religious pursuits. As they grow older still, the better prospects are offered employment in the Guards. Following graduation, they are awarded preferential jobs. There is also a career path for laborers in the Guards and Basij.\footnote{Wehrey, Frederic, Jerrold D. Green, Brian Nichiporuk, Alireza Nader, Lydia Hansell, Rasool Nafisi, and S. R. Bohandy. “Militarizing Civil Society: The IRGC’s Indoctrination, Training, and Media Activities.” In The Rise of the Pasdaran: Assessing the Domestic Roles of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps” (Santa Monica, CA; Arlington, VA; Pittsburgh, PA: RAND Corporation, 2009), pp. 35-54.}

As children move from primary education, through secondary education, through higher education, they are trained and monitored by the Guards. After they leave school or university, those students who participated in Basij afterschool activities and organizations are offered preferred employment opportunities. As in the Soviet Union, the more loyal are offered fast-track positions in the government and intelligence services. These posts are often springboards for commercial prospects because many firms are controlled by the Guards.

After consolidating power, Iran’s leaders built educational machinery to indoctrinate the youth in its revolutionary ethos. Leaders reasoned that loyalty to the regime would remain fixed if it was forged at an early age.\footnote{Hossein Aryan, “How Schoolchildren Are Brainwashed In Iran,” Radio Free Europe, May 27, 2010, https://www.rferl.org/a/Commentary_How_Schoolchildren_Are_Brainwashed_In_Iran/2054304.html (Accessed on April 22, 2020).} Much of this ideological training was overseen by the Basij. As a part of education, the Basij-run resistance centers prepare children for joining Basij units when they transfer to middle schools in early adolescence.\footnote{Hossein Aryan, “How Schoolchildren are Brainwashed In Iran,” Radio Free Europe, May 27, 2010} Then, they join Pouyandegan, or Seekers, in middle schools, and Pishgaman, or Standard Bearers, in high schools.\footnote{Anthony Cordesman, “The Crisis in Iran: What Now?” Center for Strategic and International Studies (January 11, 2018).}

**Moral Instruction and Exemplars**

Basij-led moral instruction extends well beyond the classroom. Outside of school, children are indoctrinated to prepare for adulthood. The girls are guided towards domesticity, and the boys prepare for war. Daily life toughens children. At early, impressionable ages, children are forced to witness beatings, humiliations, and killings,
as did children in the early Soviet Union and in Nazi Germany. Moderate civil servants have criticized the coarsening of children by forcing them to attend public hangings.

In Mashhad, the Guards operate an unconventional amusement park – The City of Games for Revolutionary Children. In the park, young, impressionable boys are dressed in military uniforms and shepherded around the park by a military commander who orders them to fire small-caliber weapons at a wide range of enemies. Some targets have pictures of Iraqi soldiers. Other targets are facsimiles of fighters for the Islamic State in Syria and targets of the Saudi royal family. Children blast plastic bullets into targets with images of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and U.S. political leaders.

In 1982, the Guards created its first high school in Tehran as a preparatory school for future Guards service. Soon, they opened similar schools that eased entry to university, and then to a career in government. The Guards monitor the progress of promising students from middle school through university. The Guards, particularly the Basij and the Qods Force, strategically place recruiters near holy sites, mosques, schools, and community centers to attract volunteers.

Point of Commonality Five – Integration into the Economy

Soviet and Nazi Services and National Economies

In the early 1920s, the victorious Bolsheviks eliminated disparities in wealth by eliminating the wealthy, often by shooting them. Many others were driven abroad. Some in the middle class who became communists were, nonetheless, killed under suspicion of bourgeois

112 “Revolutionary, Anti-West Indoctrination of Children by Municipality of Mashhad, Iran,” MEMRI Special Dispatches - No. 6098 (July 8, 2015).
sympathies. The more dedicated Party loyalists could live well, by the impoverished standards of the Soviet Union.

In Nazi Germany, living conditions for most Germans first spiked and then plummeted with the failed fortunes of the war after 1942. Nazi Germany had many parastatals, such as the Hermann-Göring-Werke and large, private corporate conglomerates like the I.G. Farben chemical combines.\(^{116}\) Some of the Nazi party elite lived in mansions adorned with the booty of conquered nations.

**Iran**

As in the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, there was much plunder to be redistributed in the early years of Iran’s revolution. Both the Soviet Union and Germany forcefully redistributed wealth. Lenin confiscated goods from wealthy Russians, and the Germans looted conquered nations to raise living standards in Germany and build vast public programs. From the beginning of the Islamic Republic, the state sector absorbed most large-scale industries, major minerals, banking, insurance, power generation, dams and large-scale irrigation networks, radio and television outlets, post telegraph and telephone services, aviation, shipping, and roads.\(^{117}\)

At the same time, the Revolutionary Islamic Courts confiscated the assets and charitable foundations of anti-revolutionaries.\(^{118}\) Clerics could steer business in a preferred direction by issuing a religious edict, or fatwa. Explained one Western journalist, “If he (Ayatollah Khomeini) chooses to fatwa Coke and Pepsi out of Iran, what will look like a religious ruling might actually be about something quite different.”\(^{119}\)

The Guards first moved in the construction sector and were quickly awarded projects in the billions of dollars. By the mid-1990s, many Guards served as businessmen


\(^{118}\) Shirzad, “The Politics of Privatization in Iran.” *Middle East Review of International Affairs* (Online) 14:4 (December, 2010), pp. 60-71.

representing the interests of the service. The Guards justified their preferential treatment by underscoring their need to protect the Revolution. Explained one Western bank director, the Guards replaced foreign companies with their own interests in order to protect the revolutionary spirit of the country.\(^{120}\)

Leaders of the Guards became involved in foreign trade during the Iran-Iraq War. This trade expanded significantly under the leadership of Ahmadinejad to evade sanctions.\(^{121}\) His presidency augmented the Guards influence, as he appointed Guards to the most important developmental and industrial projects and public works posts from 2005 through 2013. During this period, the Guards were awarded some $25 billion in contracts in the oil and gas sectors.\(^{122}\) The president enriched himself and the Guards by expanding the patronage system. Ahmadinejad caused the ranks of mid-level and senior Guards who were stakeholders in companies he controlled to balloon.

Though the Guards profited from Ahmadinejad’s intervention, the economy was wracked by vast market distortions.\(^{123}\) He appointed marginally educated and often incompetent Guards and Basij to key management positions, government positions, and to the upper management of public enterprises. He also pressured banks to provide preferential loans to Guards and Basij. Ahmadinejad distributed national wealth to boost his power and prestige at home. He traveled to many poorer towns, where he was greeted as a hero and where he lavished townsmen with developmental projects. Ahmadinejad’s generosity to his constituents produced enduring economic inefficiencies that continue today.\(^{124}\)


Extensive state intervention in many sectors of the economy and the jockeying between nationalization and privatization of key resources by the Guards’ leaders and pettifogging bureaucrats destroyed much of Iran’s economy.\textsuperscript{125} Within Iran’s intelligence services there are wide gaps in wealth. Some of the leaders live opulent lifestyles while the entry-level Guards are very poor.\textsuperscript{126}

Iran continues to have vast gaps in wealth. There is opulence for a politically connected few and teeming poverty for many. The disparity is evident to those who walk the streets and haunts of the cities. Iran’s fiscal policy is driven by state-directed panels and run by ruling theocrats and bureaucrats. While elites benefit, one-in-four young Iranians is unemployed.\textsuperscript{127} The national currency, the rial, has collapsed, and Iran’s central bank considered deleting four zeros from the rial.\textsuperscript{128}

The Guards control most of Iran’s economy.\textsuperscript{129} Guards have gradually built up a vast business empire in various sectors of the Iranian economy through myriad holding companies, front companies, and charitable foundations. The U.S. Treasury Department has sanctioned conglomerates and corporations because of their connections to international terrorism.\textsuperscript{130}

\textsuperscript{125} Mina Toksöz, “The Economy of Iran: The Dilemmas of an Islamic State by Parvin Alizadeh” (Book Review) The Economy of Iran: The Dilemmas of an Islamic State by Parvin Alizadeh, Middle Eastern Studies, 38:3 (2002), pp. 208-09.

\textsuperscript{126} Ahmed S. Hashim, “The Iranian Armed Forces in Politics, Revolution and War: Part One” Middle East Policy, 19:2 (Summer 2012), pp. 65-83.


The Guards’ ownership and operation of trade and industrial giants and their partial ownership of smaller Iranian companies earn the Guards up to half of the Iranian gross domestic product, by some estimates. The Guards’ economic activities include construction, oil and gas development, finance, banking, telecommunications, and criminality.

Non-Iranian companies hoping to do business in Iran need to work directly with Guards or use them as middlemen. Western businesses often employ large legal and public relations teams to navigate the Iranian labyrinth of offices and traders, and to compete on bids. Europeans will partner with companies linked to or owned by the Guards.

In July 2018, U.S. Secretary of State Pompeo publically chastised particularly corrupt and well-known Iranian leaders. The secretary also denigrated Ali Khamenei’s “own personal, off-the-books hedge fund called the Setad, worth $95 billion,” which serves as a “slush fund for the IRGC.” Many Iranians likely agree with Secretary Pompeo’s judgment that “Iran is run by something that resembles the mafia more than a government.” Some of the revenue enriches individuals in the Guards and Basij, and some is channeled to terrorist organizations.

132 Savyon and Carmon, “Post-JCPOA, The IRGC Is The Factor Stopping Iran From Integration Into The Western Economy.”
134 Marketa Hulpachova, “How to succeed in Iran: lessons from Russia and China; the economy in the Islamic republic is still largely state-owned, with much of its ‘privatized’ capital in the hands of regime-affiliated organizations,” The Guardian, July 29, 2017.
Summary

Like the Soviets and the Nazis before them, the leaders of the new Islamic Republic aspired to shape a totalitarian nation-state through coercion and repression.\footnote{Merriam-Webster defines the word “totalitarian” as: 1) “centralized control by an autocratic authority” and 2) “the political concept that the citizen should be subject to absolute state authority.”} They built the Guards to enforce their new laws, and chose piety over expertise when selecting candidates and granting promotions. The mind of the Guards reflects the Iranian regime it protects. It is skeptical of reform, hostile to the West and perceived Western influences. It is suspicious of non-Muslims, particularly Jews, and breezily attacks free spirits and nonconformists, some of whom they incarcerate.

The Guards control prison wards reserved for political prisoners. Parallels to Nazi and Soviet camps are haunting, and reflect the dark imagery of the Lubyanka and Dachau facilities. The Guards-run prison wards are not murder mills, but their medieval conditions and the Guards’ frequent beatings are intended to break any spirit of resistance. Evin prison, much like Dachau, has become iconic for state-directed brutality. Much as in the Soviet Union, mental hospitals sometimes warehouse political nonconformists. Deviations from the mullah’s rule are taken as proof of treason or mental illness.

As with the leaders of the Third Reich and the Soviets, Iranian policymakers and educators prize tomorrow’s generation for developing and protecting key ideological principles. The state oversees all elements of education and grooms the more promising youth for career tracks in the Guards.

The Guards also have external roles.\footnote{Ian Talley, “U.S. Sanctions Iran’s Evin Prison, Broadcasting Chief and Others, Alleging Human Rights Abuses; Treasury Department Action Follows Washington Dropping Out of 2015 Nuclear Deal and Outlining Requirements to End Punitive Policy,” \textit{Wall Street Journal (Online)}, May 30, 2018. \url{https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-sanctions-irans-evin-prison-broadcasting-chief-and-others-alleging-human-rights-abuses-1527705343}} Major General Soleimani, the highly charismatic and legendary former leader of the Al Qods Force, was killed on orders of the United States president. President Trump declared that he ordered the assassination to prevent an...
anticipated Iranian-sponsored attack on U.S. persons and property. He also explained that the general and the regime which he served was responsible for many earlier lethal attacks on Americans abroad. The killing sent a message that the Guards’ continued meddling in the Middle East would not be cost-free. The United States has the capacity and resolve to kill important Guards leaders if the president decides to do so.

The Guards have kept the Islamic Republic in power for over 40 years. In this sense, they have been successful, as were the SS and the KGB in propping up earlier regimes for many years. The Third Reich collapsed only when its military capabilities were completely exhausted and its armies shattered. But the SS contested every street in Berlin. The Soviet KGB, on the other hand, disbanded itself and helped to transition the Soviet Union into a new political system. As of 2020, the Guards are being tested abroad and at home. Can the Guards survive and ensure the survival of Iran’s Islamic Republic? Perhaps.

About the author

Mark Silinsky Ph.D. is a 38-year veteran analyst of the United States Department of Defense and an affiliate professor at the Haifa University. He also served as a research professor at the U.S. Army War College (2015–2018), and as a research associate at the National Intelligence University. Graduating Phi Beta Kappa from the University of Southern California, Dr. Silinsky received an M. Phil. in international relations from Oxford University, under the supervision of Sir Michael Howard; and took a Ph.D. in international development from Tulane University. He also graduated from the Naval War College and the National Defense University. Dr. Silinsky is the author of five books on the Middle East and international relations.

The views expressed in the manuscript are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of Defense or the U.S. Government. The appearance of external hyperlinks does not constitute endorsement by the United States Department of Defense (DoD) of the linked websites, or the information, products, or services contained therein. The DoD.